EDGE®

THE FUTURE OF INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT



#310
OCTOBER 2017



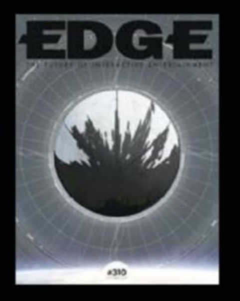
He’s got to look out for what’s over his horizon

As our masthead makes clear, **Edge** is in the business of the future of interactive entertainment. It’s a lofty goal – and, as this issue shows, an increasingly wide-ranging one. This month we head, for the second time in as many issues, to China, where some of the biggest publishers in the west are trying to break into the most lucrative market on the planet, this time by setting up shop at ChinaJoy, the nation’s equivalent of E3.

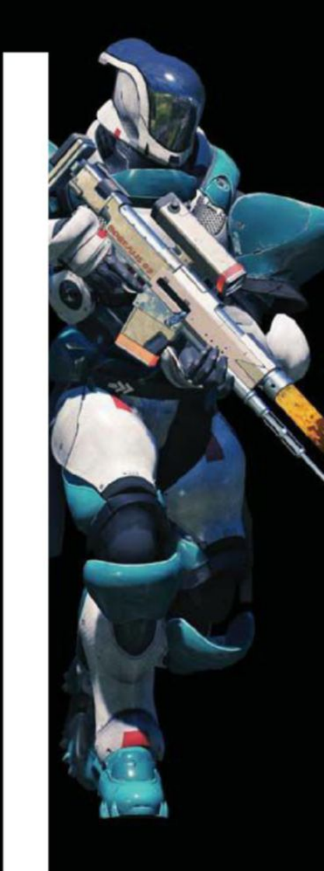
On the very next page, we hop halfway around the world to speak to *Her Story* creator Sam Barlow about his attempts to take interactive storytelling to the next level. Later, EA’s creative chief Patrick Söderlund explains how a publisher known for annual mega-franchises such as *FIFA* and *Madden* is, behind the scenes, researching deep learning and virtual humans. And if you thought our future-gazing mission statement a lofty one, wait until you hear from the various developers whose games act as cautionary tales – some of them quiet, some more overt – about the looming, unavoidable spectre of climate change.

After that, you might be glad to hear that, elsewhere, it’s business as usual. There are an uncommon number of sequels in this issue: perhaps it’s simply that time of year, or that point in a generation, when we tend to hear about games with numbers on the end of their titles. Some evolve; others merely expand. Others pretty much just do the same thing again, if we’re being honest. We try to avoid covering those, if we can.

Few, however, seem quite so vital to their makers as *Destiny 2*. The muddled first game hooked us, and many others, despite our better judgement. But it left many cold, and as the first product of a frighteningly expensive 10-year deal, its publisher Activision expected more from it. The sequel has been a long time coming – it was first slated for 2016 – and beginning on p58 we explore whether the wait has been worth it. The videogame business may be about gazing into the future, but ‘future’ is a relative concept. For Bungie, the next few months will be critical.



Exclusive subscriber edition

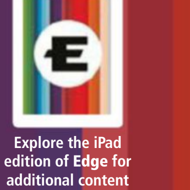




games

38






Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for additional content




Follow these links throughout the magazine for more content online



#310

sections

OCTOBER

Knowledge

Dispatches

Features



EDITORIAL
Nathan Brown editor
Jen Simpkins deputy editor
Andrew Hind art editor
Russell Lewin production editor

CONTRIBUTORS
Edwin Evans-Thirlwell, Andy Kelly, James Leach, Cliff Newman, Emmanuel Pajon, Simon Parkin, Steven Poole, Chris Schilling, Chris Thursten, Alex Wiltshire

ADVERTISING
Clare Dove commercial sales director
Kevin Stoddart account manager (+44 (0) 1225 687455 kevin.stoddart@futurenet.com)

CONTACT US
+44 (0)1225 442244 edge@futurenet.com

SUBSCRIPTIONS
Web www.myfavouritemagazines.com
Email contact@myfavouritemagazines.co.uk
Telephone 0344 848 2852
International +44 (0) 344 848 2852

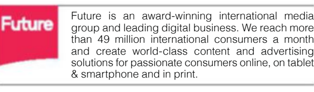
CIRCULATION
Darren Pearce circulation director +44 (0) 1202 586200

PRODUCTION
Mark Constance head of production US & UK **Clare Scott** production project manager **Hollie Dowse** advertising production manager
Jason Hudson digital editions controller **Nola Cokely** production manager

MANAGEMENT
Ross Andrews art & design director **Aaron Asadi** creative director
Tony Mott group editor in chief **Warren Brown** senior art editor

Printed in the UK by William Gibbons & Sons on behalf of Future. Distributed by Marketforce, 2nd Floor, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London E14 5HU.

Future, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA United Kingdom



Future is an award-winning international media group and leading digital business. We reach more than 49 million international consumers a month and create world-class content and advertising solutions for passionate consumers online, on tablet & smartphone and in print.

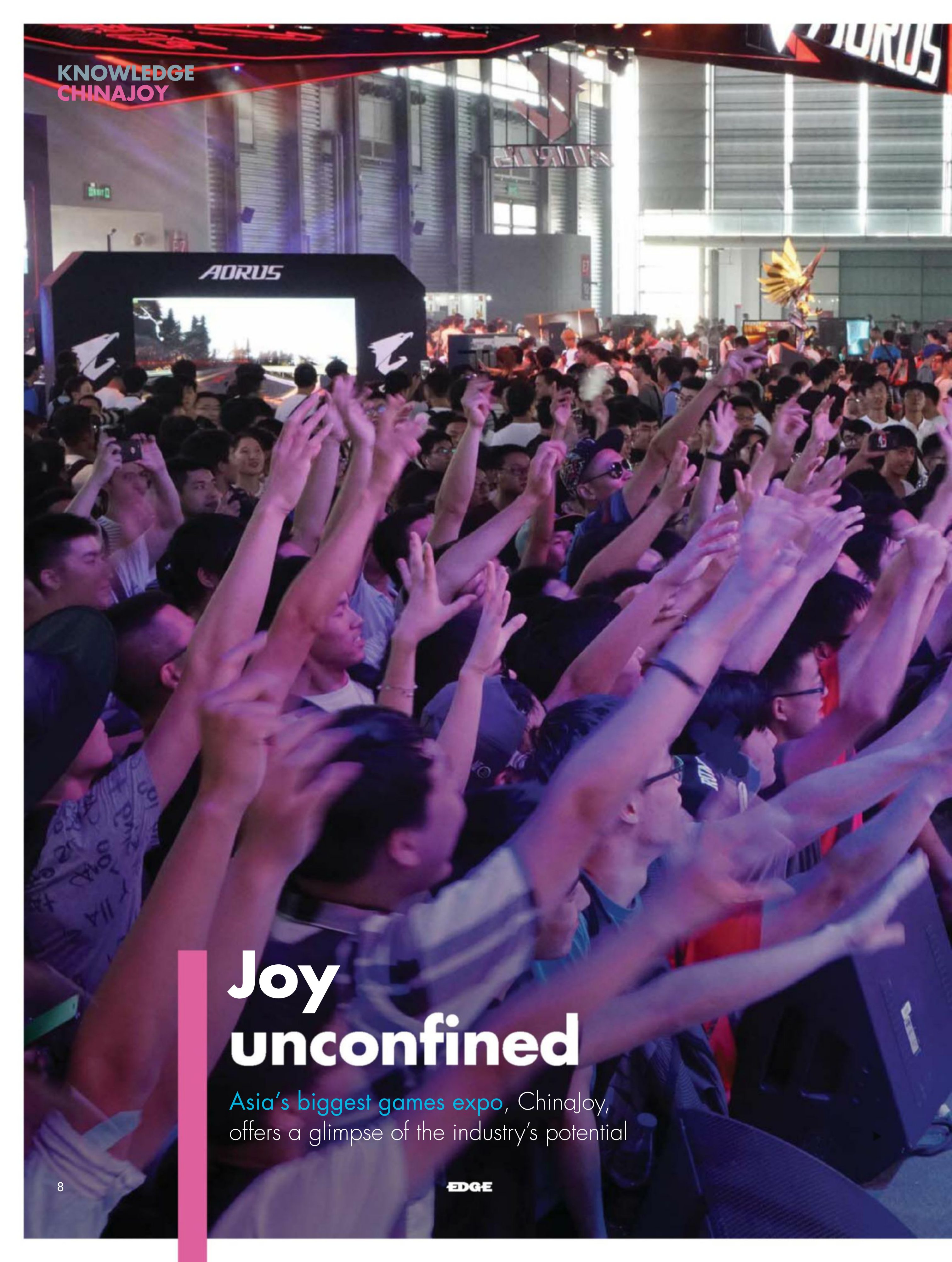
Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR).
www.futureplc.com

Chief executive Zillah Byng-Maddick
Non-executive chairman Peter Allen
Chief financial officer Penny Ladkin-Brand

Tel +44 (0)207 0424000 (London)
Tel +44 (0)1225 442244 (Bath)

We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards. The manufacturing paper mill holds full FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certification and accreditation





Joy unconfined

Asia's biggest games expo, ChinaJoy, offers a glimpse of the industry's potential



This is only a slice of ChinaJoy: some 350,000 people wander its five halls over four days

PAN PIPELINES
ChinaJoy is attached to CDEC, a Chinese developer conference that takes place in a nearby hotel. This year's opening keynote speeches by speakers from the Chinese government, Tencent, NetEase and PerfectWorld stressed the importance of protecting Chinese culture through the creation of original games and the promotion of Chinese heroes. 'Pan-entertainment' was the buzzword of choice – franchises built around games, comics, movies and TV. This is a natural fit for the Chinese industry, whose major players (particularly Tencent) operate in social media, movie production, games development and book publishing simultaneously. Warner Brothers' Steven Chiang and Ubisoft's Yves Guillemot presented their own companies as models for the Chinese games industry in this regard, with Ubisoft stressing its new movie production and themepark businesses alongside traditional games development.

The China Digital Entertainment Expo – known as ChinaJoy – is the largest games show in Asia and comparable to the biggest shows in the west. Drawing 350,000 people over four days at the end of July, this year's expo spanned ten halls in the Shanghai New International Expo Center. Although outwardly similar in format to Gamescom or the newly open-to-the-public E3, ChinaJoy provides a cross-section of a massive industry whose practices and preferences differ substantially from those of the west. Further, it presents western publishers in a very different light, demonstrating the ways that they've begun to adapt themselves to the Chinese market.

The biggest multiplatform foreign publishers – Microsoft, Sony, EA and Ubisoft – occupy a single hall, which is notably quieter than every other area at the show. There are no queues at Microsoft's booth, where players can try a selection of Xbox One, PC and indie games including *Halo Wars 2* and *Tokyo 42*. Game consoles were banned in China from 2000 to 2015, and their presence at ChinaJoy – as well as the presence of publishers that traditionally rely on them – is understandably limited.

Sony fares better thanks to an offering tailored to the Chinese audience. A sizeable amount of booth space is given over to *Monkey King: Hero Is Back The Game*; announced at the show, it's an adaptation of a 2015 animated movie, itself based on Chinese literary classic Journey To The West. PSVR also features heavily, drawing significant crowds; VR and AR experiences are a regular fixture at ChinaJoy. Yet EA's massive open-plan booth is almost empty, despite a BMX biking show designed to lure attendees in. Games include *Plants Vs Zombies*, *Need For Speed Online* and *FIFA Online 3*; all are either online-only or mobile games, which reflects the popularity of these formats in China.

Ubisoft's booth is the busiest of the four, and of the western publishers its portfolio is the most clearly targeted at the local audience. You'd expect that from Ubisoft, to be fair: the publisher has had a studio in Shanghai for 20 years, predating not only other foreign studios but the Chinese domestic games industry itself. Space is given over to a censored and localised version of *For Honor*; *Steep*; and a suite of mobile games designed for the Chinese market, including two *Might & Magic* games, *Heroes Dynasty* and *Era Of Chaos*. Ubisoft's booth also houses a popular merchandise store, and there's a queue for the *Rabbids*-themed VR rollercoaster experience, intended for shopping malls, arcades and cinemas, that's become something of a fixture on Ubisoft's event circuit.

Around the fringes of the hall are smaller stalls offering still more AR and VR experiences. An indie VR action game, *Zhan Dou*, is a good deal busier than EA's booth despite taking up a tiny fraction of the space. There's also a popular demonstration of a real-life robot fighting game, where players control miniature bots using a motion-tracking kit strapped to their arms and back.

The isolation of these foreign companies is due to particularities of Chinese business law. Each operates independently here: Microsoft China runs the Xbox booth, while Ubisoft is a rare example of a western company that is incorporated locally. More commonly, foreign developers and publishers get permission to operate in China by partnering with a local company. So although most overseas publishers operate at the fringes of the show, foreign series are elsewhere found attached to Chinese companies like Tencent, Alibaba, Perfect World and Netease.

Foreign developers and publishers get permission to operate in China by partnering with a local company

These are spread over four halls across the northern side of the expo centre. Tencent, as China's most ubiquitous corporation, has a hall almost to itself. Here, Chinese mobile MMOs and strategy games mingle with foreign names like *World Of Tanks* and *League Of Legends* (Tencent owns a majority stake in *LOL*'s developer, Riot Games). Blizzard has a massive presence in its partner Netease's hall: China has been an important market for Blizzard for many years, and its games are frequently designed with a Chinese audience – and Chinese government approval – in mind.

Netease is also the publisher of *Minecraft* in China; the game has had an official presence there since April, and has its own huge themed booth on the show floor. Across most of the show, games familiar to western audiences mingle with local games at a ratio of about 30:70 – with roughly equivalent popularity. Korean MMOs such as *Black Desert Online* are popular, however, as is the NCsoft-published *Guild Wars 2*.

What stands out, particularly when comparing ChinaJoy to its western equivalents, is the absence of singleplayer and narrative-focused games. The most popular titles in China are social or competitive, and the relative scarcity of consoles means that audiences naturally gravitate toward mobile and PC games. Free-to-play is the standard. Although ChinaJoy is around the same size as Gamescom – and much bigger than E3 – it feels larger still thanks to the sheer number of outwardly similar games. There are no massive queues for *Uncharted* or *Fallout*. Indeed, the fact that mobile management sim *Fallout Shelter* is the only Bethesda game at the show offers some perspective on why these sorts of games have suddenly become important to western publishers. It's not just about getting access to the App Store or Google Play in the US and Europe; the right mobile game also provides a way in to the Chinese market that few other types of game can offer. It'd be reasonable to expect more publishers to follow suit.

New aspects of the industry that can seem precarious in the west, particularly VR and esports, have a much more confident presence at ChinaJoy. Both have become, essentially, marketing tools. In an Intel-run hall given over to PC hardware, rows of VR stages demonstrate a variety of futuristic gaming experiences including a team shooter where one player on each team 'enters' the game



Cosplay contests are commonplace, but this is a rare sight: most stages feature scantily clad young women, not men

through the use of a VR headset, motion controllers, and an upright motion-tracking rig that allows them to run and crouch on the spot. Elsewhere, Intel's Extreme Masters esports series features top-level *StarCraft II;* Hi-Rez Studios' *Paladins*, which has proven very popular in Asia, has its own tournament.

These are the most traditional manifestations of VR and esports. Elsewhere, they're employed as booth-enhancing bolt-ons. Almost every stand has an attention-grabbing stage show, and esports tournaments are weirdly interchangeable with cosplay contests and dance shows as ways of drawing the eye. Bespoke VR experiences fulfil a similar role within booths, provided alongside browser and mobile games as a way of promoting a game's wider brand. Given the uncertainty surrounding the consumer adoption of VR in the west, marketing practices like this appear to be part of the technology's future.

Although ChinaJoy offers a snapshot of the Chinese game industry, it'd be wrong to assume that it entirely reflects the tastes of the nation's game-playing community. As a government-run event, the focus is on games that have passed the censors and are attached to distributors which have been authorised to sell their products in China. As such, some of China's most popular games, such as *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*, are not playable on the show floor.

As E309's Eastern Promises explained, for a game to be officially released in China it requires validation from the General Administration of Press and Publishing, or GAPP. Application for GAPP approval can only be sought by Chinese companies, which is why the vast majority of foreign publishers operate with a Chinese partner. The list of prohibited content is long, but includes bloody violence, any political themes, distortion of historical fact, incitation of unrest and erotic content. The latter is somewhat ironic, as Chinese games are frequently more heavily sexualised than their western counterparts and western games seeking to crack the Chinese market are often sexualised to match. *Torchlight II*, a cutesy US-developed action-RPG, has as its Chinese mascot a female warrior in an overflowing corset and spine-breaking pose.

Chinese players do play censored games, however, primarily through grey-market distributors and Steam, which remains (for now) strangely exempt from many of the strictures imposed by the GAPP. This means that there is an audience in China for games that cannot technically be offered to the public at ChinaJoy. Several publishers use this to draw players to their booths, featuring prohibited games in adverts, trailers or streams, all of which are exempt from the restrictions on playable demos in the country.

Players are drawn to stages by livestreamed *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* tournaments, and the soldier from *Counter-Strike* appears alongside characters from Chinese mobile games on banner advertising. The Ubisoft booth prominently features *Assassin's Creed: Origins* despite the series having never been officially released in China. Yet the grey market has created an audience for *Assassin's Creed* that numbers in the millions, and the movie did well here; China will get its own *Assassin's Creed* soon in the form of *Blood Sail*, a mobile MMO with an anime-inspired art style. The censors will very likely ban *Origins* as they did its predecessors, and as such it'll never be playable at ChinaJoy. The presence of the brand makes sense for Ubisoft regardless.

Chinese policy has grown steadily more stringent over the last ten years. ChinaJoy demonstrates both a domestic and international industry in the process of transition, but what it is transitioning *to* is not necessarily clear. As hundreds of thousands of players crowded Shanghai in the last days of July, the Chinese government announced new plans to crack down on the VPNs that many use to play banned games through the country's Great Firewall. While in many respects this year's show highlights the many doors opening between China and the western game industry, it was also a reminder that doors can swing shut, too. ■

Striking gold

A fighting game for total beginners: how a genre veteran hopes to transform funds into fundamentals

He worked as lead designer on *Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix*, was running the Evolution tournament before it even bore the name, and has placed in the top eight three times at the championships as a professional player: **David Sirlin** is serious about fighting games. It's perhaps surprising, then, that the one he's currently developing is aimed at a far more casual audience.

Fantasy Strike is a 2D fighter with an extremely simple control scheme. There's a button to walk left, another to walk right, a third to jump and a fourth to attack. Quarter-circles and multi-input combos are nowhere to be found: two more buttons trigger a special attack each, while pressing Attack and a Special together unleashes your super. That's your lot. Our immediate reaction is sceptical. But then, *Fantasy Strike*'s purpose isn't to preach to the choir. "I think that, while I have my roots in hardcore games, the real opportunity is to go much wider and get a whole bunch of new people into the genre," Sirlin tells us.

> "I think that, while I have my roots in hardcore games, the real opportunity is to go much wider"

This is not the first time a prominent figure in the fighting-game community has sought to bring brawling to the masses. Free-to-play, eight-button 2D robot rumbler *Rising Thunder* had virtually the same MO before it was bought and shuttered by Riot Games last year. It was directed by Evo co-founders Tom and Tony Cannon, and produced by former Capcom employee Seth Killian, all of whom Sirlin knows personally. Although *Fantasy Strike* was in development long before it, Sirlin acknowledges the similarities. "You could put Seth's text [about *Rising Thunder*] right next to mine [about *Fantasy Strike*] and you couldn't really tell them apart," he says. "The problem was that their game, I felt, was much more complex. So it was confusing, because they'd say a thing, and then we'd say the same thing, and then we'd have to go, 'But, for real!'. They chose a point on the spectrum that was pretty close to *Street Fighter IV*, but with easier controls."

By contrast, *Fantasy Strike* has been stripped back and rebuilt from the bare essentials. "The reason that our game is so different, I think, is actually because of *Divekick*," Sirlin says. "When I saw *Divekick*, my eyes really opened. It caused me to think, if they can do all that with only two buttons, what if there was a third button? What if you could walk left and right?" Sirlin began to design *Fantasy Strike* in the smallest increments possible. "By starting with something simpler – too simple, maybe, for what I was after – and adding to it until you reach the threshold where you've got the gameplay you want, the result is a much more streamlined, elegant design. Everything from top to bottom is about accessibility. It wouldn't have looked that way if I started with something like *Street Fighter IV* and made the commands easier. The baggage of the genre would still be there. I hate to say something negative, but I feel like that's what happened with *Rising Thunder*. It's just not quite committing to this idea as much." It's something you certainly couldn't accuse *Fantasy Strike* of. From the cooldown-centric supers, to health bars split into hit-equalling segments, to countering an opponent's throw by simply not pressing any buttons, everything that feels counterintuitive to fighting-game veterans is proving revelatory to the newbies playtesting it.



David Sirlin has designed fighting and strategy card games, and wrote 'Playing To Win', a book on competitive gaming



Of equal note is how *Fantasy Strike* is being funded. Part of the game's budget is from external investors; the rest will be made up of backers buying shares in the title via crowdfunding service Fig, where Sirlin hopes to raise $500,000 by August 25. In *Fantasy Strike*'s case, 24 per cent of total revenue will be sectioned off and distributed to those with stakes. But Sirlin is also running a *Fantasy Strike* Patreon, where fans can also support the game financially. He's careful to make the difference clear. Once the Fig ends, investors will receive Steam keys for an "early-early access", highly-polished build of the game. Sirlin's Patreon predates *Fantasy Strike*, has been rebranded for the new game, and is a way for long-time supporters to receive updates, play prototype builds and even have a direct say in development.

It's a convoluted funding process. But development costs mean it's a necessary one, and having run five previous Kickstarters, Sirlin knows what he's doing. His passion for bringing the genre to a new audience, meanwhile, cannot be understated. He thinks of fighting-game skill in two categories: 'contested' and 'uncontested'. 'Uncontested' displays of technical prowess – the likes of a Daigo parry, for example – are of less interest to him than 'contested' skill: decision-making, strategy, out-thinking the opponent. "Everything in that category, to me, is what's exciting," he says. "If someone was pretty good at that, but couldn't really express it because they couldn't do the uncontested skills, that's really sad to me. I want more people to feel that." ■



Comboing moves is easier thanks to a generous eight-frame input buffer



Fantasy Strike's colourful characters are drawn from Sirlin's card game Yomi





ABOVE **Stone golem Rook's body and animations bear more than a passing resemblance to Zangief's.** LEFT **Super attacks recharge over time, so meter management isn't a worry**



ON A ROLL

Sirlin was at the genesis of GGPO: years later, his newest game champions it



Fantasy Strike's online multiplayer will use GGPO networking for lag-free, responsive play. Should you receive an input from an opponent that doesn't match up with your experience of what happened on-screen, the netcode rewinds a frame or two, then inserts the correct input. Back in the day, Sirlin was the first ever player to test Tony Cannon's GGPO netcode. "He asked me 'How is it?'. And I said, 'Well, I've played a lot of online fighting games, and I guess this is the best.' He said, 'This is only a prototype; I haven't optimised it yet, so if you think it's the best already, then I should keep working on this. I told him, 'Definitely keep working on this, dude!' All these years later, we're licensing it."

His Story

Two years on from his award-winning breakthrough, Sam Barlow is back with two provocative new projects

Five minutes into our conversation with Sam Barlow, the line goes dead. He calls back and apologises – his phone was so hot, he explains, it had switched itself off. That says something for how in-demand the creator of *Her Story* is these days. He's currently shooting an interactive film, a contemporary riff on '80s Cold War sci-fi WarGames. Also in the pipeline is a new game, *Telling Lies*, for which he's partnered with Annapurna Interactive. Here, he discusses life since his self-developed indie hit brought him to Hollywood's attention.

What surprised you most about the response to *Her Story*?

Realising the genre sold it to a broader audience. The people that discovered *Her Story* didn't think, 'Here's a neat narrative experiment in non-linear storytelling'. They thought, 'Oh, I get it, it's an interrogation. I watch police shows, I know that their stories are often jumbled, and they have multiple layers'. And the interface is way more accessible than saying, 'Here are two sticks that control your body and your head, now move around a 3D space where you have no peripheral vision'. Without really meaning to, I managed to make an experience that is accessible to people in a way that a lot of videogames aren't. That quickly became a lightning rod in certain communities and allowed me to move onto doing other cool things.

How did it bring you into contact with people from outside games?

Show a game to an exec at some cable TV channel and they're not going to be able to play it – but with *Her Story* you can show them and they get it. So the first six months after it came out I was having meetings, doing festivals and shows, and it was such an enlightening experience because making videogames is so insular – you don't really share what you're doing because you're protective of your ideas. I felt kind of dumb on one level, not realising all these people were already making cool interactive things. That led to discussions with Eko, the company making WarGames with MGM, and I came in and tried to give my insight into how you could tell narrative interactively. I had so many questions. How do I build on this audience I've created? And where is this audience going to be in the next few years? Eko's vision is to have this stuff freely available streaming over the internet in places where anyone can get hold of it. Without people realising, you sneak these rich interactive experiences under their noses and just have them discover them without having to have someone talk them through or learn how to use a controller.



SHUTTER SHAKE-UP
Barlow is clearly enjoying the opportunity to disrupt established ideas of film and TV as he brings his experience in the interactive space to bear. "It's cool to see the look on people's faces," he says. "The movie and TV industries are pretty solidified in the way they do things. The way a crew is organised, the way they break down a script – it's a very well-oiled machine, and that's how you can have hundreds of people running around and still manage to get the shot in the can. This complicated endeavour works because they've had 100 years of figuring out how this stuff works. So to come into that world and give them a script and experience that changes all those rules is really fun and exciting."

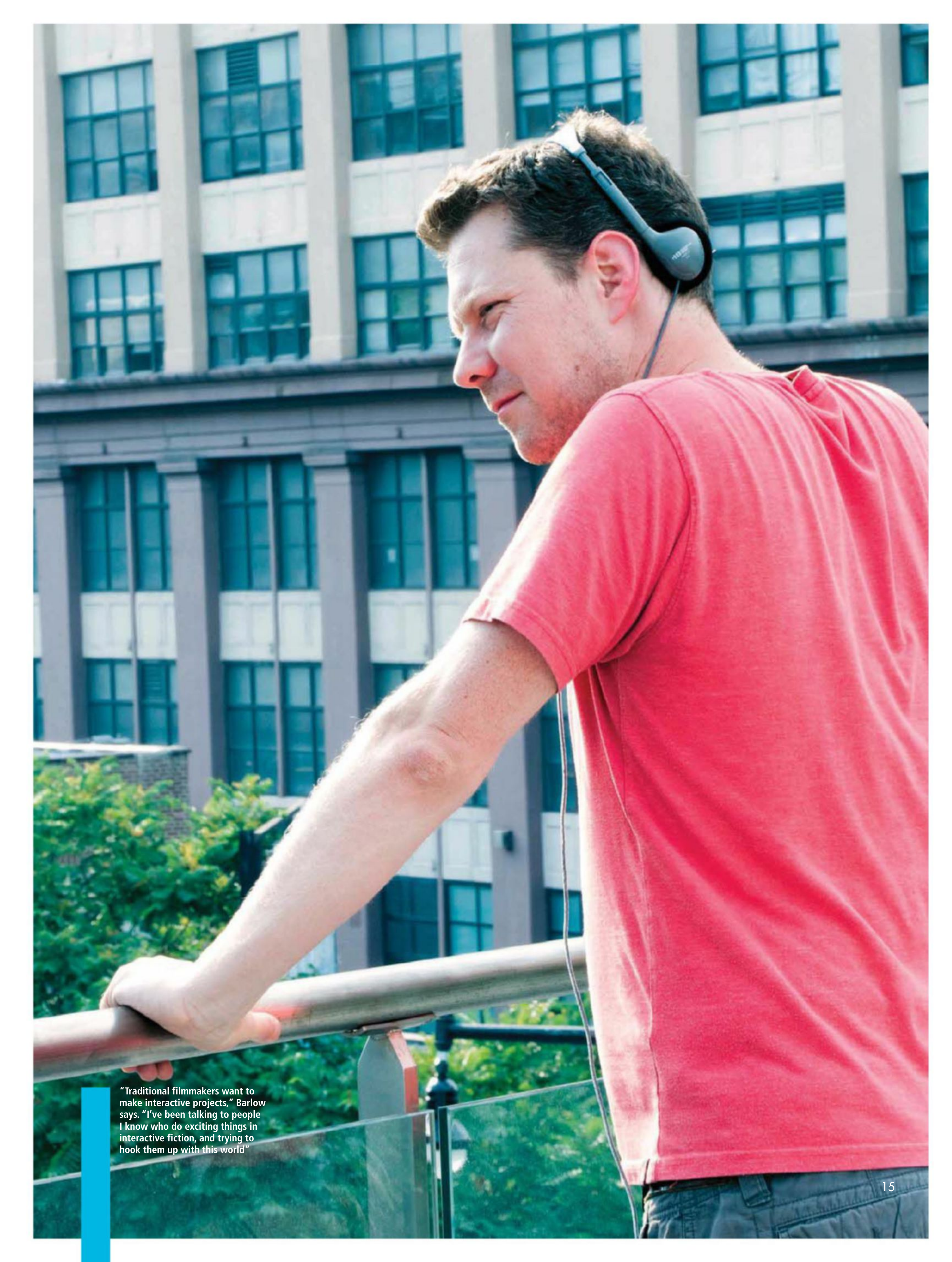
> "Without people realising, you sneak these rich interactive experiences under their noses"

What can you tell us about your new game, *Telling Lies*?

I didn't immediately want to follow up *Her Story*, and didn't even necessarily want to do something *like* it. I get excited by shiny new ideas. Certainly, the easiest – maybe the most sensible – thing to do would be a sequel. But I definitely didn't want to do that. I think one of the difficulties with some of this audience is that they enjoy *Her Story*, and then wonder what they can play next. But there isn't something that specifically scratches that itch. So I started thinking: how can I do something that builds on everything I loved about *Her Story*, but takes it to the next level, and feels as big of a risk as the first game did? It felt like a strong push away from the kinds of stories you would usually tell in a game. This feels like a continued push to look at the kind of material we can talk about in an interactive context. It's the most ambitious, complex and challenging thing I've ever written, and I'm trying to put together the right team to help flesh it out.

What made Annapurna the right partner for the game?

I got talking to them even before they'd announced that they were publishing videogames. Their whole mission is to create rich, creator-driven stories: you look at their movies and it's an eclectic catalogue, but it's all uncompromising stuff. They're very much about supporting the vision, and the quality bar is very important to them. I pitched them this provocative idea, which was like the litmus test – I thought, 'If you start trying to tweak that idea, or you have concerns, it's not going to work'. But they loved the idea, and were completely on board. ■



"Traditional filmmakers want to make interactive projects," Barlow says. "I've been talking to people I know who do exciting things in interactive fiction, and trying to hook them up with this world"



Olsen also credits Éric Chahi's *Another World* and the concept art of Nicolas Bouvier as inspirations for *Somerville*. "I wanted to do something more stylised. It holds up better over time and allows the viewer to subconsciously create detail where it's lacking"



NEON GENESIS

New studio Jumpship details the origins of its imposing sci-fi debut

Produced by former Playdead CEO Dino Patti, and the brainchild of film veteran **Chris Olsen**, *Somerville* prompts awe and dread. "I've always loved strong graphic framing, that confidence to give something relatively still a lot of life and allow the viewer to soak it all in," Olsen explains. "On top of that, an emphasis on gigantic scale. The monolithic paintings from John Harris, the locked-off wide shots in *Evangelion* – they were a great source of inspiration."

Composition is critical: like *Limbo* and *Inside* before it, Patti's latest project is a side-scrolling adventure, though here colour is everywhere, dystopia is now apocalypse, and there is combat as well as the usual panicked escape. "I'm drawn by aesthetically pleasing games that have interesting gameplay integrated into a moving narrative," Patti tells us. "This is what I saw the seeds of in *Somerville.*"

Sci-fi is as old as the hills, however, and hard to make fresh. "The secret to making anything distinct or worth anyone's time," Olsen says, "is to start with something that is deeply personal and hold onto that until the end. When you extract from yourself an experience, you imbue it with something that can't be replicated whilst also giving it the care that it deserves. What becomes important is not the need to be different, but how best to communicate perspective." This may have been Olsen's game, but it already has Playdead's signature: there's no release date, and Patti and Olsen are in no mood to hurry. ■

Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"It takes six months to create a single car. It's over-specced for PS4 Pro. We are building for **future versions of the console**, [not] the one we see today."

Kazunori Yamauchi lays the groundwork for *Gran Turismo Sport* being delayed until PS6



"You know, **sometimes life isn't fair.** Things are more interesting like that, with the blue shells of life."

Mario Kart 8 director **Kosuke Yabuki** puts a positive spin on the worst power-up in games



"Players are very supportive of slavery, because there's money to be made. People say, 'Oh, it's only a game.' I'm sure in Roman times, people justified it a bit like that: '**At least we're looking after them.**'"

Is **David Braben** talking about *Elite Dangerous*, or a new Frontier overtime policy?

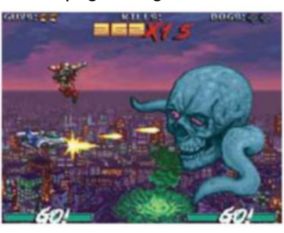
"We're driving more and more of our marketing away from traditional media and **into the influencers of the world**. And because of that, you're going to see different patterns in marketing spend."



Thanks, EA CFO **Blake Jorgensen**. And they say old media are the dodgy ones

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Skycurser
Manufacturer Griffin Aerotech

For a retro 2D shoot 'em up housed inside an arcade cabinet, *Skycurser*'s development process is unexpectedly modern: players all over the world have been beta testing it for about two years. Indie company Griffin Aerotech is carving out its own route into the future of arcade-game development with its debut title, with preorders officially rolling out in dedicated cabinets and JAMMA conversion kits to buyers at time of writing.

Players who have already bought a beta kit (built around the company's first hardware unit, Airframe) have received a steady stream of *Skycurser* updates via physical media – and later, WiFi – to test. The official cabinet release is now loaded with the resulting launch build, the product of various gameplay tweaks, bug fixes and player feedback. Thanks to this, the game is transformed: a *Splatterhouse*-inspired, pixellated tangle of spaceships, cyborg skulls and floating eyeballs bursting into mechanical guts when hit by the Skycurser's shotgun fire and katana across four levels. Dual joystick cabinets can run the new co-op mode (in which you and your friend play as pilot and talking dog), while Griffin has promised that global online leaderboards and the final two levels are on their way as free updates.

The idea of a '90s-style arcade game that can be updated by its devs as quickly, easily and regularly as a console title is, no doubt, an exciting prospect for both arcade owners and players. With Griffin confirming it has more games in development for Airframe, this could be the start of a whole new way of life for the arcade.

My Favourite Game Njambi McGrath

How Doom and Mario Kart reflect different sides of the Kenyan comedian's personality

Njambi McGrath is a Kenyan-born comedian and writer, performing her sharp, one-liner style of stand-up regularly on the London circuit. She attended university in both London and New York, has an IT degree, is fluent in three languages and is currently writing a book.

What game first got you excited?
I grew up in Kenya, so while most people had all the technology to play games and all of that stuff – my husband, he got the chance to play games in arcades – my first game was *Snoopy*. It was the most unsatisfying game, because he would just walk up to the roof, and then you'd make him sleep… That was the first game I can ever remember playing.

What did you play that on?
I don't know whether it was made in Japan or China or whatever, but it looked like a very crude version of a Game Boy. It was just a single screen. Somebody brought it to school, and it was like, 'Oh my god, what's that?'. We played it for ages and ages. I was in boarding school, and so people used to bring all sorts of things. We would trade sweets to be able to play games. That's the only one that I've never seen again – I don't know where they got it from. That was the first game I kind of got addicted to.

When did you move from Kenya to the UK? Did you have access to more games then?
I was 18. When I was a student, I used to work in a cyber cafe, and so I had access to online games. There was a guy I used to work with who introduced me to *Doom*. During breaks we used to play multiplayer – shooting the hell out of each other. So he introduced me to what is quite a violent game! But you know, I think when you're younger, you don't actually see the violence in the videogame.

LIFE LESSONS
McGrath trained in IT at Thames Valley University in 1989, largely to appease her parents. After landing a job, she quickly realised that the profession wasn't for her. "I didn't really know the reality of the job," she tells us. "It was only when I retrained to work in education that I realised I love entertaining people. But I didn't grow up feeling that comedy was my calling. It happened by chance." Her new show, Breaking Black, opened at the Edinburgh Comedy Festival on August 3.



How did your parents feel about that?
They are fairly strict – but you know, they wouldn't even understand what it is! I guess any teenager, at whatever age, will always do things that their parents can never understand or comprehend. I don't think they knew what I was playing.

Did that extend to when you got started in comedy?
Yeah, they didn't understand! What I call non-traditional format jobs are always surprising to African parents. When I was growing up, as a girl you had to be a teacher, or a nurse, or a secretary. So anything like comedy is quite puzzling. If I was a singer, they would get it, because in church people sing all the time. But standing in front of people… And in many cases, the comedy we had in Kenya was slapstick, very silly comedy. So it's not even just standing in front of people and trying to make them laugh – to them, that's comedy.

> "You know, I think when you're younger, you don't actually see the violence in the videogame"

Your style of comedy is very different – incisive and political. Who inspired you growing up?
I like the edginess of Joan Rivers. She pushed boundaries. I like – not to shock, but you know, there are some things that people say "No, no, you can't talk about that." And I like the sharpness of Robin Williams, because his style is just punch, punch, punch. A combination of those two is kind of the comedy I've got, along with my passion for politics.

Do you still have time to play games?
Hardly any. I've been fighting so hard to finish writing my show, to finish writing my book… I did get into *New Super Mario Bros* and *Mario Kart Wii*. There are still some elements of fighting but it's not the realistic violence of *Doom*. I have a DS, and we have a Wii. At some point, my husband and I just said, instead of going to the tennis courts, why don't we get Wii games and play tennis on the Wii? Which is lame.

What, then, is your favourite game?
I would have to say *Mario Kart*. When you're a comedian, you drive to gigs all the time, and if you're not careful, you're going to get speeding tickets. When you're in *Mario Kart*, nobody cares. You're going so fast, and crashing… I suppose it's kind of the relief of it. I don't know what it is, I think it's the speed.

Perhaps the slapstick humour appeals, given your roots?
Actually, yes – that's the kind of comedy we had on TV when I was growing up. Somebody would see a cockroach and they would be jumping on the table and falling off of it. So yeah, I guess so. ■



Is McGrath competitive when playing *Mario Kart*? "I don't think that you can play games without wanting to win," she tells us. "It doesn't matter whether it's in real life or virtual reality, a loss is a loss."

APP
Nintendo Switch Online
bit.ly/switchappiOS
bit.ly/switchappandroid

Splatoon 2's launch also sees the arrival of Switch's companion app, a free download that grants the user the ability to access voice chat and extra game features via Splatnet 2. Nintendo being Nintendo, it's all a bit misguided. Inviting friends into voice-chat lounges takes more steps than is sensible, presumably in an effort to protect young'uns from toxic in-game chat. And while being able to check the *Splatoon 2* stage schedule, comb through stats and order limited-edition gear is handy, the decision to pull these features out of the game and lock them off to non-smartphone users grates a little. Nevertheless, it could be a useful hub for Switch owners as more games are added, but for now it's just an irritatingly essential companion piece to the marvellous *Splatoon 2*.





VIDEO
Gfinity Elite Series
bit.ly/gfinityelite

Both BT Sport and the BBC are finally cottoning on to esports, signing deals with British esports organiser Gfinity to broadcast its Elite Series tournament. BT Sport 3 and BBC Three on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays now feature teams of pro *Street Fighter V*, *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* and *Rocket League* players battling for a prize of £225,000. BBC Three's fare is variable: it is 20 whole minutes before any matches are played, and while the *CS:GO* slot is expertly hosted, *SFV* is awkwardly presented and the game never explained. Nevertheless, it's a huge step forward for UK esports.

WEB GAME
Senses High
bit.ly/senseshigh

Guiding the reader's eye around the pages of a comic book is an art: bungle it, and a story's timeline is scrambled. Gianluca Sorrentino's game turns it into a puzzle mechanic. You control a hooded man running from a SWAT team for reasons unknown. Scenes play out in monochromatic action panels: left mouse clicks in one will move time forward inside of it, while the right mouse button reverses the flow. This proves handy when trying to parkour over rooftops without being spotted by snipers or helicopters. Reversing enemy panels while advancing your own can manipulate sweeping spotlights, or goad shots into glass obstacles. It's a sleek, smart concept – the promise that it's 'To be continued…' would certainly have us turning the page, if it had any. We hope to see it fleshed out.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

When we weren't doing everything else, we were thinking about stuff like this

CONSOLE
The Ataribox
bit.ly/ataribox2017

ET: The Extra-Terrestrial gave our younger selves nightmares for months, you know. And while it was nothing compared to the horrors that were visited on the Atari execs who carried the can for the most famous failure in videogame history, it does mean we're a little cool on the company's new Ataribox. Designed both to appeal to old fans while also attracting new ones, the new, HDMI-enabled console has a ribbed plastic design, with a front panel available in glass or classic wood. The company says the system will support 'current content' as well as vintage games; quite how that will work for a company whose firstparty software effort consists solely of *Rollercoaster Tycoon* is anyone's guess, however.

continue

Murder ace
Tokido, one of the Japanese *Street Fighter* 'gods', finally wins at Evo

In media Rez
Thanks to all who attended our Mizuguchi session at Develop

Grounded
After five US trips in three months, we are truly ready for a nice sit down

Splendid isolation
A modder finishes the VR port of *Alien Isolation*

quit

P$ Plus
A tenner more per year? Better get writing in to Dialogue, hadn't you

Stop making cents
Is there a company left in games that Tencent *doesn't* own a stake in?

Serf war
You'd think freelancers would take it easy on their editors in *Splatoon 2*

Ashes to ashes
Servers collapse at the first Pokémon Go Fest

TWEETS

A Toy Story world for *Kingdom Hearts 3* makes sense, because *KH3* development stops moving whenever someone looks at it.
Imran Khan @imranzomg
Senior editor, Game Informer

To the individual who tried to log in to the beta over 500 times this weekend, the wait is almost over.
Luke Smith @thislukesmith
Game director, *Destiny 2*

The upside of an indie hit has never been higher. The chances of making a living from it have never been lower.
Cliff Harris @cliffski
Founder, Positech Games

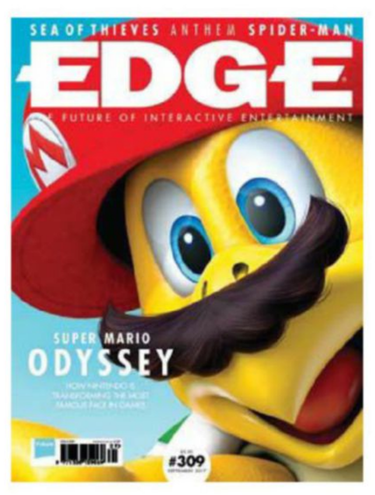
Cancelled a seaside drone flight in Brighton because setting down the thing on the ground caused the local seagulls to try and mate with it.
Rami Ismail @tha_rami
Co-founder, Vlambeer



www.twitter.com/edgeonline
Follow **Edge** on Twitter



DISPATCHES OCTOBER



Issue 309

Dialogue

Send your views, using 'Dialogue' as the subject line, to edge@futurenet.com. Our letter of the month wins a year's subscription to PlayStation Plus, courtesy of Sony Interactive Entertainment


PlayStation.Plus

Silver screen (shower scene)

It seems that games and gaming are finally being accepted as a staple of popular culture, achieving a level of ubiquity that means that, even if you aren't playing them, you certainly can't avoid them.

E3 gets mentioned in mainstream media; games garner increasing column inches in newspapers, and gaming festivals are now a thing. So far, so good, for our favourite hobby. But there is something missing, so obviously and conspicuously absent. I am talking, of course, about games on TV.

Old people will fondly recall the likes of GamesMaster and Bad Influence, an innocent time when game critique was limited to graphics, sound and 'playability', whatever that was. On reflection, however, there hasn't been much since. Videogame Nation was a decent stab at a more rounded and mature show, but was hidden away on Challenge, and has been killed off.

Encouragingly, Dara O'Briain's Go 8 Bit is a great example of how games can be neatly integrated into an existing format – in this case, the comedy panel show – to great effect. What a pity it's hidden away on Dave, and too few people seem to know about it.

If gaming has truly hit the mainstream, then it seems strange that it has yet to penetrate mainstream TV. I feel there is a place for it, even in the days of YouTube channels and social media. What do you guys think? Will we see a game programme on TV fronted by Mr Nathan Brown?
Thomas McInnes

BBC Three's recent broadcast of the Gfinity Elite Series of esports tournaments gets to the heart of the problem from one side. Go 8 Bit comes at it from the other. Newcomers are baffled by anything too technical; old hands put off by things they deem to be too simplistic. Perhaps a middle ground could be found, but would that serve both groups, or simply leave both dissatisfied? As for our 'esteemed' editor playing a role, we can't see the networks going for it – but maybe we'll get some new headshots done just in case.

Puppets

Your article Machine Language (see **E**308), about game dialogue AI, was simply fantastic; a prime example of why I look forward to each of your issues. But halfway through the article, I couldn't help but feel a sense of gloom.

For years I've yearned for characters in games that were more than things to trade with or destroy. And yet, I now feel like maybe that's just what they're best off doing. Videogames are good at dealing with data. Trading comes naturally to computers, hence our games are full of statistics to juggle around. Even better is data in the form of coordinates, i.e. movement: controllers always have D-pads and sticks because their input (and the screen's output) is quick and intuitive. With movement, we destroy characters in games. With trade we gain from them. For years on end, I blamed the medium and its lacklustre AI for sticking to these two forms of interaction. But I've recently been considering other ways we play other types of games, and things aren't that different. Sports are about movement. Board games are about trade and movement. Kids spend most of their time in the playground trying all sorts of new ways to move their body. And when it comes to adults, what are the most popular outings for company trips? Movement in the form of karting, Segways, GPS/AR games, and bowling. Now there are popular games which actually involve talking with others: Werewolf, Mafia, escape rooms, and Dungeons & Dragons come to mind, but that's all I can honestly come up with.

"I've yearned for characters in games that were more than things to trade with or destroy"



The truth is, it seems we simply don't want to do too much talking. We just want something simple, something easy to grasp. Perhaps we might even want pastimes that are less like the daily struggle we have with real-world people.

I feel bad writing this, because I really want videogames to achieve the status of other arts. But maybe we're looking at this the wrong way: maybe it's language that should try to be more like games. We spend so much time talking with each other, yet we still have wars and people voting against their own interest. I've read more than 1,000 works of literature, but I'd sooner share my five favourite videogames with friends than my five favourite books. Hurray for Emily Short and Mitu Khandaker for their efforts; I'd be happily proven wrong. But for now, I think it's only fitting that I'm feeling more hyped for yet another version of *Metroid II* than I am about SpiritAI.

Robert August de Meijer

What makes SpiritAI so intriguing is not just the problem it is trying to solve, but the angle from which it is approaching it. Like most great works of innovation within games, it starts from the hypothesis that things can be made better. While we agree the world will continue to turn if SpiritAI fails, we certainly hope to see it succeed.

Weak become heroes

I want to tell you a story about how gaming changed my life, how it saved my life, and how it helped me through the hardest times in my life.

It all started in school, as the tried and true 'getting bullied' story almost all gamers have felt. This was also around the time of *GTA: San Andreas*' release, and I would use this game to get my anger out. I would kill with no regrets, no remorse, and no real-life repercussions. The digital people of San Andreas didn't know what hit them; a torrent of rage poured onto them, never-ending in its thirst for blood.

This continued into *GTAIV*, but with better reactions (with the Euphoria ragdoll-physics system) I got even more enjoyment and venting ability from the game.

Time goes on and I steadily get better, becoming less angry. But the world had other plans and my mum passed away. I was about eight years old.

Skip many years into the future and the release of *Life Is Strange*. Through events in the ending, I got to pick if someone I loved lived or died. It is the single hardest thing I have ever had to do, since it directly ties back to my wanting to go back and save my mum. The helplessness I felt about not being able to save her. After making the choice I had a mini-breakdown because I picked not to save the person I loved. I didn't want to be the one to condemn thousands of people to their deaths out of selfishness.

It helped me truly come to terms with what had happened. After many years of being down, hitting the absolute bottom and coming back up, *Life Is Strange* (like *GTA*) gave me a release I had never felt before. Games are life. They are love. For me, at least.

Pierre Fouquet

A heartwarming tale, for which many thanks. Your subscription to PlayStation Plus is on its way, which should set you up nicely for things to kill – or save – over the next 12 months. One day, though, you're going to have to fill us in on the intervening years. We assume one doesn't change from mass murderer into saviour overnight.

Please stay

Ever since I discovered *Doom* on a shareware disc circa 1995, I've loved firstperson shooters. I was thrilled by the razor-wire tension of *Alien: Trilogy*, the insomnia, espionage and art of *XIII*, and the blockbuster rollercoaster ride that was *Call Of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, a game which married story, gameplay and progression seamlessly.

Narrative, control, balance, graphics, progression; they're all a key part of what makes the FPS one of the most popular and enduring genres, but not every evolutionary leap the genre makes is – pardon the pun – killing it. The grind for progression is putting the bore back into war. The mechanic's there to engage the player over a longer period of time, but is it an enjoyable experience, or just an addictive one?

I recently sunk 50 repetitive hours into the *Ghost Recon Wildlands* 'campaign'. The experience was threadbare, but I pushed on because I thought there had to be more to the game than the same cycle of ambush, firefight, loot-crate, lacklustre cutscene, lather, rinse and repeat. Turns out I could have had pretty much the full experience if I'd just played the beta; outside of the constant grind for new gun-loot and skill upgrades there was only the thinnest of gameplay experiences to be had.

Battlefield 4 shares the same core gameplay DNA as *Wildlands*: the longer you spend in the game the more upgrades and customisation loot you'll earn. I've ground away 246 hours in *Battlefield 4* but I'm increasingly of the opinion that it's time to hang up my in-game irons.

I think I stopped actively enjoying *BF4* some time ago, but the grind for guns kept me in the multiplayer lobby long after I should have walked away. Maybe grinding for progression is just a cynical mechanic; maybe I'm a sap for going back again and again. Either way I've decided to set my sights on a richer experience.

Ian Bruce

Don't leave us hanging like that: what richer experience could there possibly be than watching a series of XP progress bars going up while gritting your teeth at a series of rubbish loot drops? It's a sad reality of the medium that one good idea gets borrowed, expanded and reused until everyone's sick of it. The online game progression system doesn't seem likely to change any time soon. If you turn up something better, please let us know at the usual address. ■



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Shoot first, ask questions later

From Aldous Huxley's Brave New World to Kathryn Bigelow's Strange Days and beyond, science fiction has long warned about the dangerously seductive nature of virtual entertainment. If videogames (defined broadly) get too good, more and more people are going to be seriously tempted to sit indoors with a headset and escape into clean digital fantasies while the physical world crumbles around us all.

This now appears to be actually happening, at least according to a new report from the National Bureau of Economic Research in the US. By 2015, men aged between 21 and 30 were working 203 hours per year less than the same age group had done in 2000. Older men were working 40 hours more — or, on average, a whole extra week per year. The study authors, having controlled for numerous possible factors and employed time-use data, say that a large proportion of the difference is probably due to "innovations in gaming/recreational computing" during that period, which makes playing games just more fun and desirable for young men than working longer hours. Most remarkably, some young male videogame aficionados are just not even trying to get jobs at all.

If this is really what is going on, then the hardcore games-not-jobs crowd are powerful cultural dissidents, whether they intend to be or not. Rather than going on marches, they go on virtual raids; they stay home and manipulate the console controller, refusing to participate at all in what is known as the 'labour market'. They take to an electronically enabled extreme the joyous nihilism of Herman Melville's heroic clerk Bartleby, whose constant refrain when asked to do things around the office is: "I would prefer not to."

We are, of course, supposed to be alarmed at this. The gaming Bartlebys, it is said, are wasting formative years in which they should be learning marketable skills. If they finally emerge from their virtual holiday in their late 20s or 30s, they will find themselves already unemployable, on the post-human scrapheap. But then so will a lot of us anyway, if what we are told about the increasing automation of jobs by computer algorithms and robots is true.

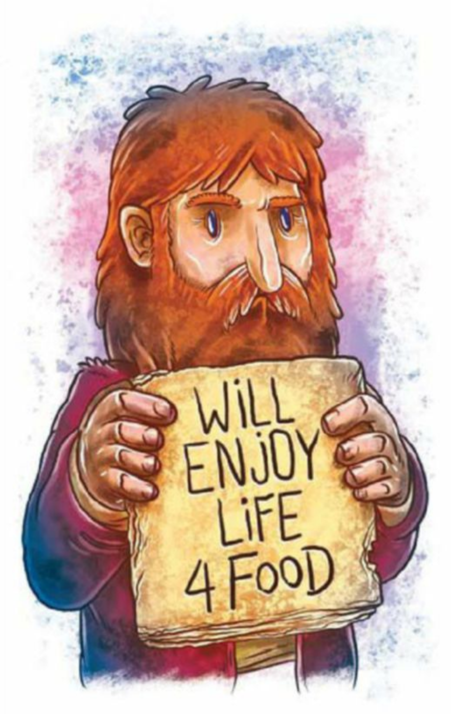


Illustration kaeru.com.ar

Most remarkably, some young male videogame aficionados are just not even trying to get jobs at all

And not being able to get a job is only a problem if the only way to survive in modern society is to have a job. It's notable that the people who write about the inherent dignity and worth of work tend to be people who enjoy the privilege of having very interesting and fulfilling jobs: they are academics, or opinion columnists, and so forth. When I recall my working in supermarkets, I am not struck by a very powerful memory of the inherent dignity and importance of doing so: I just needed the money.

And what if I hadn't needed it? Making a comeback among the Silicon Valley elite is the idea of just giving everyone enough money to live on: a Universal Basic Income. Because, as they say, so many "jobs will be destroyed" by technology — in fact, managers and executives, not robots, will choose to destroy these jobs — it's only fair to use the productivity gains to give everyone a free living wage just for being a citizen.

Having researched this idea in some detail for my most recent book, I am a fan of it, especially since the main criticism levied tends to depend on a kind of exceptionalist moralism. "People would just stay in all day and watch TV," the critics moan. But when asked if they themselves would do that, they say of course not: they would pursue creative or social interests. So why would the great unwashed masses be any different?

The truth is that in any system of society, there are always going to be some Bartlebys, whether they spend their time as monks cut off from the world (which, interestingly, is supposed to be virtuous) or as *World Of Warcraft* fanatics. And under a Universal Basic Income, some proportion of people probably would just stay in all day and play videogames. But what is wrong with that? Staying in all day and playing videogames is surely much better for society as a whole than, say, working furiously as a politician to dismantle healthcare, or start wars in far-off lands. That neoliberal ideologues and authoritarian leaders work very hard is no good argument in favour of what they do.

So if videogames are becoming better than the real world, how about instead of wringing our hands about the ever-increasing attractions of electronic art, we try to improve the real world itself?

Steven Poole's Trigger Happy 2.0 is now available from Amazon. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



NATHAN BROWN

Big Picture Mode

Industry issues given the widescreen treatment

My home Internet's been down all week, and boy does it hurt. It's been a while, to be fair – we have the odd outage here and there, but as I write this I'm on day three of five, and it's been brutal. It's been especially tough on the kid, whose media consumption is almost entirely powered by remote servers, and you want to try explaining that to a three-year-old. There's an episode of Peppa Pig where there's a power cut, and she goes round the house suggesting all kinds of things they could do while they wait for the lights to go back on; everything, of course, requires electricity. The kid's been a bit like that this week, reeling off a revolving carousel of his favourite TV shows. No, son, Fireman Sam needs the internet. So does Paw Patrol and, yep, Peppa Sodding Pig, and all the rest of them too. (We do, I promise, control his TV time quite rigidly. It's just all he ever bloody thinks about.)

Anyway, the outage has been rough on the grown-ups, too, if only in the way it has showed us just how much bandwidth we get through without thinking about it. We streamed a certain property show – I shan't say which as it's too embarrassing, embarrassing, embarrassing – while tethered to an iPhone, and it cost us a gigabyte. We did it for Game Of Thrones, which was obviously bandwidth well spent. But the other thing? I went through an eighth of my phone's monthly data allowance watching a really wet couple completely bottle it on a great five-bed place in Dorset.

But in the meantime, we're stuck with the apocalyptic horror of regularly scheduled television, our in-progress on-demand shows put forcibly on hold until the bandwidth flows anew. At least, you might think, I have videogames – but I'm scared to even turn the consoles on. We take data for granted these days, and the buggers under the telly update themselves while we sleep. I had a sneak preview of this on a transatlantic trip last year, when I ponied up £15 for 150MB of in-flight WiFi and burned through it all in ten minutes after my phone saw my wireless connection as licence to hurriedly update every app I have ever downloaded.



Illustration kaeru.com.ar

We take data for granted these days, and the buggers under the telly update themselves while we sleep

Lesson learned, you'd think, and so did I. Needing a review build of a Steam game, I savvily downloaded it at the office, copied it to USB and brought it home, then put it in the appropriate folder on my personal rig. I started up Steam, and took great care to pause the download queue immediately. Then I told it to 'install' the game I needed to play, and sat there smugly as it detected the files and started it up within seconds. I sat back and picked up the controller; all was well until, ten minutes later, my phone buzzed with a text from my mobile provider, saying I'd used my entire monthly data allowance. It seems Steam took me clicking the Install button on a single game as an instruction to unpause all my downloads, and quickly ate through the entire queue, wasting my precious bandwidth updating various SteamVR games I'm quite sure I have never played. Think of all the sweet property programmes I could have watched, dear reader, and weep for me.

So, after that, everything can get stuffed. I still need to play that game, but I'm leaving Steam running so it can't try and pull another fast one, all Internet connections disabled, only briefly tethering PC to phone to send an email or sync with Google docs. I'm not turning the PS4 on, because if you think I'm giving my phone's login details to a console which kicks off downloads at all hours whether it's powered on or off and frequently appears to have a mind of its own, you are properly kidding yourself. The Switch, similarly, is never really asleep. And I'm not turning the Xbox One on because, firstly, it always seems to need several gigabytes of updates and, secondly, there's nothing I want to play on it anyway; I've played more GameCube games in the last 12 months (hang on, there's an idea). I've missed the *Destiny* 2 beta, and I suppose I might as well just delete *Splatoon* 2, since everyone else will have levelled up too much by the time I can finally get on. It's just Scrabble, books and polite conversation in the Brown household now – until Thursday, anyway, when the engineer comes. Then, the gloves will come off. I'll play *Destiny* non-stop; I'll update every single game I have installed, just in case this sorry mess happens again. And then I'll really go nuts. There's a show about young couples house-hunting in South London that I've had my eye on for weeks.

Nathan Brown is **Edge***'s editor and look, if you're in the market, you can't be afraid of a little DIY for heaven's sake*

SUBSCRIBE TO

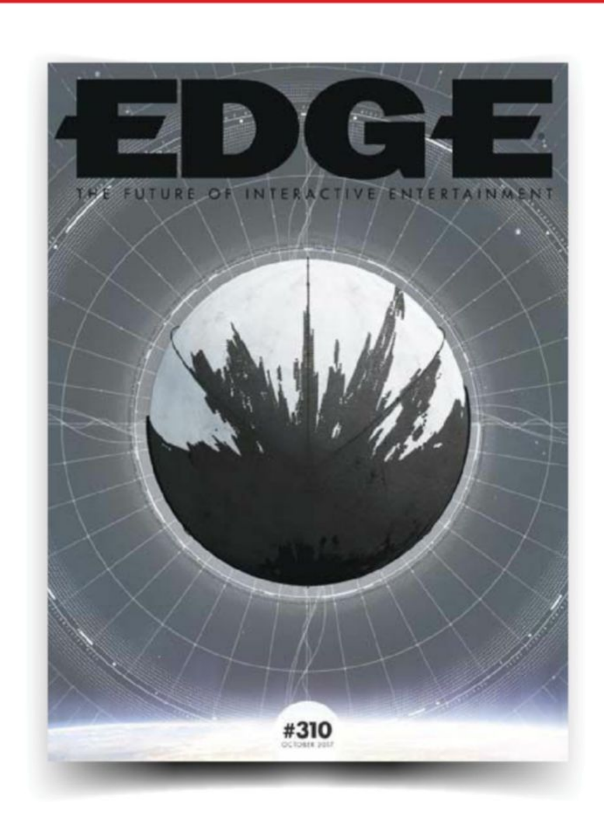
EDGE

Get the best possible value with our complete print and digital bundle



CHOOSE YOUR PACKAGE

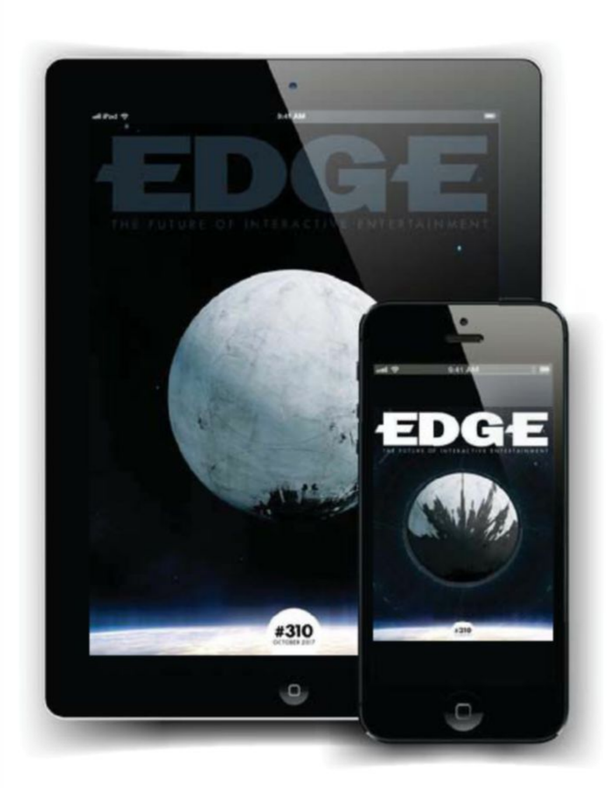
PRINT



Every issue delivered to your door, with exclusive covers only available to subscribers

Only £16
every three months

DIGITAL



Instant digital access on your iOS and Android devices, with exclusive animated covers on iPad

Only £6.75
every three months

#310

H Y P E

THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Hype content

Big game

As a famous saying (almost) goes, the bigger they are, the more fun it is to make them fall over. One of videogaming's most enduring fantasies is the gigantic end-of-level boss, but these days the rank and file fodder are often the size of buildings, too.

Indeed, that's precisely the reason for *Monster Hunter*'s success, and it's a concept that's being taken to new heights in the series' latest entry, *Monster Hunter: World* (p34). Yes, the world is bigger and more open. There are myriad quality-of-life improvements for series fans to chew over. And it marks the series' return to powerful console hardware after a decade on portable devices. But the real hook here is the beasts – great wandering colossi which now, rather than kicking their heels and waiting for a team of humans with melee weapons to show up, are part of an ecosystem, and will scrap between themselves. The appeal is obvious.

Capcom is joined on its quest by Phoenix Labs, a Canadian studio whose debut game *Dauntless* (p50) is clearly inspired by *Monster Hunter* and its ilk. As a free-to-play open-world RPG, it naturally has a delicate balance to strike: of being monetisable without being grubby, and of offering progression without feeling grindy. But what will ultimately decide its fate will be how satisfying it is to kill massive things. The fantasy has to come first.

A key part of that fantasy is progression: you don't get to fight Godzilla at level one, but must work your way up to it. It's a concept put into delightful, surreal context by *Donut County* (p52). Essentially an inverted *Katamari Damacy*, you control a small hole in the ground that expands with every creature or object that falls into it. Eventually you'll be able to swallow up things so large that not even *Monster Hunter* would dare put them in front of you – and without a sword being swung. If only you could loot the corpse.

MOST WANTED

Nidhogg 2 PC, PS4
Review code for Messhof's sword-poking sequel sadly didn't arrive in time for this issue's deadline, but it's probably for the best. After all, the day the first *Nidhogg* arrived in the **Edge** office, we didn't get a tremendous amount done. If **E**311 feels a bit phoned in, you'll know why.

Assassin's Creed Origins
PC, PS4, Xbox One
That E3 demo may not have flattered, but last year just wasn't the same without a new *Assassin's Creed*. It will forever have its warts, certainly, but there is always magic buried somewhere too. An overseas expedition is imminent; we'll let you know what we turn up.

Star Fox 2 SNES
Forget *Mario + Rabbids*: the biggest Nintendo surprise of 2017 is over 20 years old. This sequel, cancelled shortly before release in 1995, will finally be playable thanks to SNES Mini. It'll likely be rubbish, yes, but we're looking forward to finding out for ourselves. Surely it can't be worse than *Adventures*.



HYPE

MONSTER HUNTER: WORLD

Why Capcom's cult favourite isn't dumbing down, but opening up

Developer/publisher Capcom
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin Japan
Release 2018

Capcom may have rung the changes for *Monster Hunter: World*, but the biggest of all was the announcement itself. An E3 reveal, after all, says much about where the publisher's priorities lie, as it looks for ways to match the series' phenomenal Japanese success on foreign shores. What better way to prove your commitment to overseas players than by showing off your new game to the huge audience watching the west's biggest videogame show? When series producer **Ryozo Tsujimoto** talks about "keeping an eye" on the reaction back in Japan, an acknowledgement that Capcom hasn't yet had a chance to talk directly to its largest fanbase, it's clear the company means business.

Tsujimoto attributes its success at home to a "perfect storm" of conditions. The series only really took off with the first PSP entry, since Japan's population density and the prevalence of portable hardware made it easier for people to play together. Joining a hunt was simple when you already had allies nearby without having to specifically seek them out. He acknowledges that the situation is rather different over here. "In most western countries outside of the largest cities, finding another person who even has a portable game console, let alone owns and wants to play *Monster Hunter*, is a lot more challenging for a lot of people," he says. "I think that's always been something that's held back the explosive success of Japan transferring to the west."

He happily concedes, too, that localisation delays and separate servers for each territory have made it challenging for Capcom to foster a truly global hunter community. "I think the smallest gap we've had has been about six months, but often up to a year or more has passed between the Japanese and the western release," he says. "A couple of iterations ago, we merged the western servers, so you'd have North America and Europe together, but Japan was still separate. With *Monster Hunter: World*, we're not only merging the servers into one global online community who can all play together, but we're also going to have a simultaneous launch window where the titles come out pretty much at the same time around the world. I think that's going to have a big impact on how the game does in the west."

Any lingering doubts, meanwhile, that this wasn't a 'proper' entry in the series, but rather a spin-off along the lines of *Monster Hunter Frontier*, have been quickly dispelled. That initial footage was notable as much for the established idiosyncrasies that were absent as the new additions. We have to admit, we'll miss the muscle-man pose your hunter would pull off after glugging down a restorative. But perhaps we're just fusty old ▶





Series producer Ryozo Tsujimoto (top) and Kaname Fujioka, co-director



There will be more face-offs between beasts this time: a Rathalos is strong enough to grab newcomer Anjanath in its talons before slamming it down



traditionalists, and most of the minor changes seem eminently sensible. You can now pick up items as you pass by them rather than needing to stop, while certain environmental items will activate as soon as you grab them – such as plants that instantly heal you or boost your stamina. "It's about having a smoothness to the experience that reduces that slightly stop-start, staccato style we've had in the past," co-director **Kaname Fujioka** explains. "By eliminating those little bumps in the road, we can make it easier to get to the more enjoyable parts, like the hunting actions."

That streamlining has led to a significant change in how *Monster Hunter* handles tutorials, helping chivvy things along for a series notorious for being a slow starter. They'll now be fully voiced, so rather than having to tap through reams of text before you can properly begin, your handler will bring

> ***"When you actually get into the meaty action of the game, it's really satisfying to play"***

you up to speed, from detailed combat tips to basic explanations of the natural flow of a hunt. "Hopefully that smooth in-game experience of learning while you play will assuage the issues people have had with the game in the past," Tsujimoto says. "When you actually get into the meaty action of the game, it's really satisfying to play. But perhaps in the past some people have not been able to quite make it that far: to really get to grips with the concepts the game is built around, and learn how the gameplay flow works."

It is, of course, a matter of balance, and Tsujimoto is well aware that any sops to newcomers will be viewed by some as dumbing down. When he says his team is "not about to throw out the baby with the bathwater" it's evident that he's concerned about the response to the changes they're making. "The core experience is pure *Monster Hunter* through and through," he insists. "We just want to take a look at the stuff outside of that core, and critically reevaluate it." Which means, essentially, bringing it up to speed with modern western games. Rather than being segmented into zones, the map is seamless, but while hunters can move freely around, so too can the monsters. If the idea of healing on the go might be anathema to some players, consider that you can no longer retreat to a 'safe' zone to recover and re-sharpen your weapon. In other words, don't expect Capcom to suddenly go easy on you simply because you now have radial menus and the ability to switch weapons mid-hunt.

Ah yes, the weapons. All 14 types are here, and though *Generations'* hunter arts and styles are no more, a few moves have been lifted from it. Beyond a new forward hop, the Lance doesn't appear to have changed much, though the Hammer now has a quicker pummelling attack that's ideal for landing a succession of hits on downed creatures, and there's a gorgeous, exaggerated hit-pause on its whirling attack. Dual Blades are more acrobatic than ever, with a spinning move letting you cartwheel over the back of monsters, while refined movement and aiming controls might even convince some to switch to the Bow for the first time. Then again, why leave behind the Insect Glaive, when it now allows air-dashes, prompting the kind of flashy combos that would look at home in a Platinum game?

Grapple hooks and ghillie suits offer new escape and stealth options respectively, though we're rather less sold on a third addition to your hunter's arsenal. Investigate a monster's footprint, for example, and you can send out a cluster of fireflies that will leave a neon-yellow trail that should guide you to your quarry. Though *World* has mostly borrowed intelligently from western sandbox games, we're not convinced it needed a detective mode. We hope that this will be optional.

Still, tellingly, the reaction from fans so far has grown more positive as more has been revealed, initial reticence shifting to a wider acceptance of the tweaks to the series' longstanding formula. "All the things we've described are going to make it easier to pick up," Fujioka says. "But at the same time, once you're in, you won't want to put it down." Time will tell whether Capcom can indeed have its cake and eat it, but the prospect of a truly global community of hunters for the first time is a mouthwatering one indeed. ■



Nature of the beast

It's obviously the best-looking *Monster Hunter* game to date, but Capcom's using more powerful hardware for more than just shinier, furrier monsters. "We wanted to see how we can use that not just to up our game with the visuals, but in terms of creating a living, breathing ecosystem, with rich interactions between the different monsters in the game," Tsujimoto says. The idea of a proper food chain has been only hinted at in past games – a Seltas Queen will eat her male counterpart for sustenance, while Deviljhos aren't fussy about who or what they're attacking – but the sight of a Great Jagrass (a lizard-like newcomer) gulping down a lumbering Aptonoth suggests you'll be able to use other monsters as a distraction during hunts. Indeed, plenty of the bigger creatures won't even acknowledge you until you start attacking them.



TOP **Aggro an Anjanath and it'll follow you relentlessly; no longer can you retreat to a new zone for a breather.** ABOVE **Mounting a monster is easier and more dynamic, though you'll fall off if your teammates topple your ride.** MAIN **If this looks like too much work for a lone hunter, organising multiplayer hunts will be easier: you can fire up a flare to call for help**

TOP ***Monster Hunter* has had climbable surfaces before, but *World*'s environments have more elevation, while a new grapple lets you reach higher ground much quicker.** RIGHT **Getting this close to an Anjanath is rarely a good idea. If the jaws don't put you off, it can breathe fire**



Lost Sphear follows *I Am Setsuna*'s lead, with wistful, painterly, pastel concept art, a contemporary reimagining of the bright approach of the Super Nintendo-era JRPGs from which it takes its other cues



HYPE

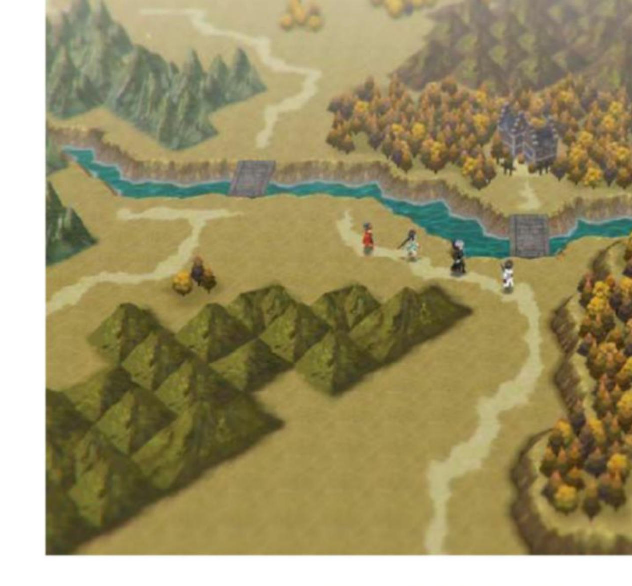
LOST SPHEAR

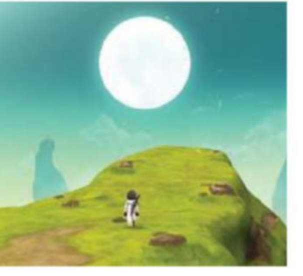
Tokyo RPG Factory's second project mixes melancholy with nostalgia

Developer	Tokyo RPG Factory
Publisher	Square Enix
Format	PC, PS4, Switch
Origin	Japan
Release	Early 2018



LOST SPHEAR





Compared to those of his colleagues tasked with figuring out the future and profitability of the Japanese RPG, **Atsushi Hashimoto**'s day job is more straightforward. As director of Tokyo RPG Factory, a small team stationed within Square Enix's lavish Shinjuku headquarters, Hashimoto's brief is simply to make affordable games that recapture the spirit and ambiance of the company's beloved 16bit catalogue. He is, in other words, in the business of nostalgia-making – a comfortable place to be when the contemporary JRPG is faltering. While the director of the no-doubt-in-development *Final Fantasy XVI* sweats somewhere else in the building in search of maps to places that don't yet exist, Hashimoto need only unfurl the well-worn and proven blueprints of *Chrono Trigger*, *Final Fantasy VI* and all the rest, and follow their example.

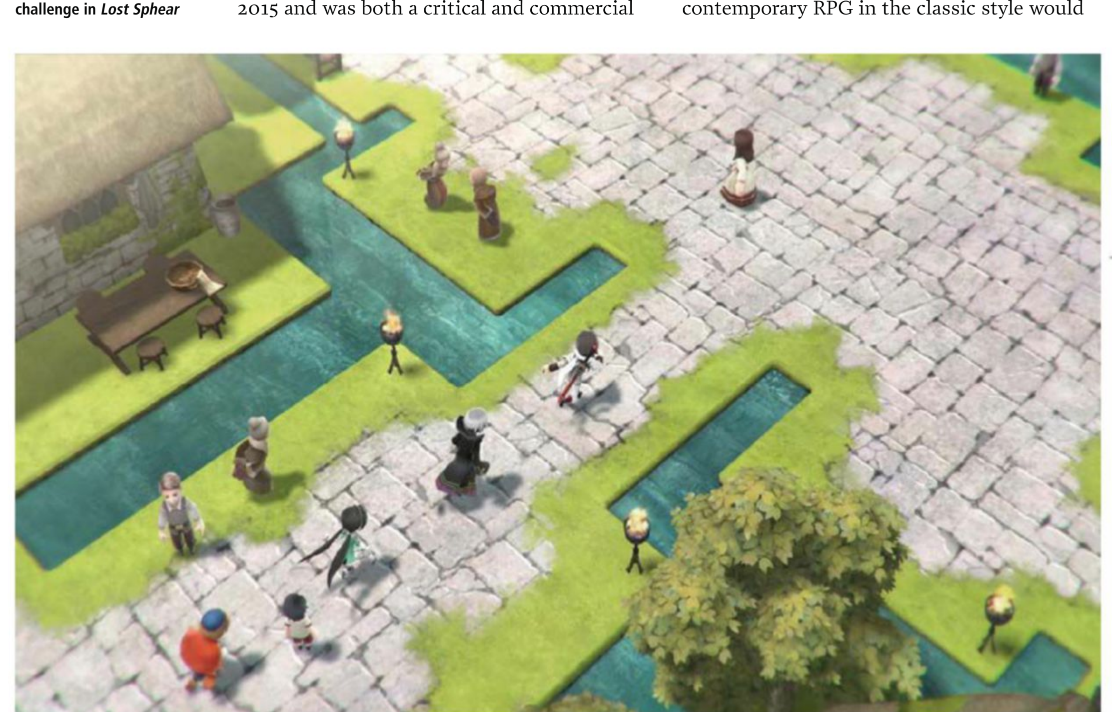
Not that he hasn't brought his own vision and flair to the enterprise. *I Am Setsuna*, Hashimoto's directorial debut, was released in 2015 and was both a critical and commercial success. Built in Unity, it was a thoroughly straightforward game with a straightforward score, a straightforward plot and the straightforward rhythms of team combat and recuperation. But in its plainspoken confidence and competence, the game filled a yawning gap in the JRPG market. It sold enough, seemingly, to guarantee the future of Hashimoto and his team's continued excursions into the past: *Lost Sphear* is the team's second game, one that aims to address some of the niggles and complaints aimed at its predecessor, without the need to pick up its narrative threads and build a formal series. This is an all-new story with an all-new cast, even if its style and approach offer a continuation of *I Am Setsuna*'s example.

Hashimoto, however, is not taking anything for granted. "With *I Am Setsuna*, we had an idea of what would be a good game and an interesting approach," he tells us. "To a certain degree, we found there was a gap between our perception of what we thought a contemporary RPG in the classic style would



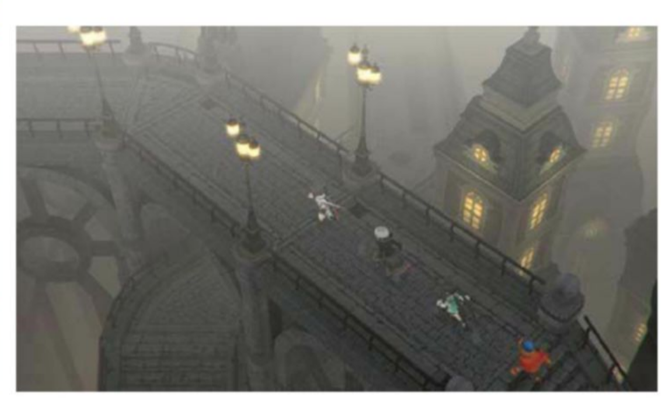
ABOVE ***Chrono Trigger*'s battle system once again provides the template for *Lost Sphear*'s combat, albeit now with the capacity for positional strategising**

Critics argued that *I Am Setsuna* became too easy through a combination of powerful combos and an unlimited inventory, two facets that have been overhauled to maintain challenge in *Lost Sphear*

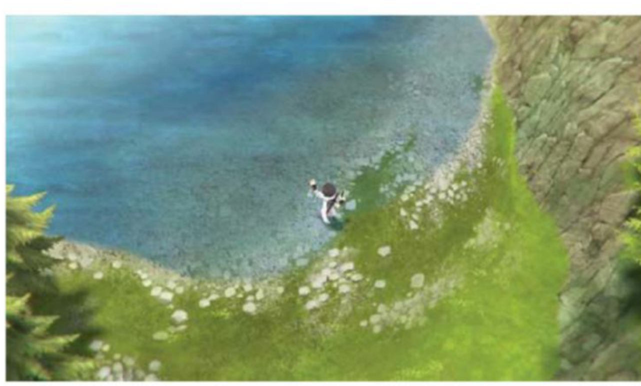








LEFT **Where *I Am Setsuna* limited its scenes to the bucolic – thick forests, thunderstruck mountaintops, rolling hills – *Lost Sphear* has a wider range of locales, including dour, yet oddly striking industrial cities**



TOP LEFT **Play switches to an overhead world map whenever you exit a town or dungeon, in the familiar style of pre-PS2 *Final Fantasy* games.**
ABOVE **The objects that 'disappear' from *Lost Sphear*'s world range from rocks up to entire towns**

***I Am Setsuna* proved an early success on Switch. *Lost Sphear* has been designed specifically with the console in mind, since it's a platform that Hashimoto says is ideal for the kinds of games the studio wants to make**

need, and what fans were looking for. For example, there were no inns in our game. It turns out that a lot of people *love* inns. So we've put them in to the new game. Wherever possible, this time around we've tried to close those sorts of gaps."

I Am Setsuna's theme was the folly of unexamined tradition – of doing things just because that's the way they've always been done (an apropos subject, considering the current state of the genre). *Lost Sphear* also has a subject relevant to its form: that of fading memories. When a recollection is lost in a person's mind, that location or individual disappears entirely from the world, to be whisked off to a purgatory known only as Lost, where it remains, unrecoverable. One day 16-year-old protagonist Kanata returns home to find his home town wiped off the map in this way. He soon discovers that, unlike the rest of the population, he has the power to restore that which is lost. Together with his childhood friends, Lumina and Locke, as well as an older man named Van (names that will be somewhat familiar to *Final Fantasy* aficionados), Kanata works to reinstate these lost pieces of the world.

If Hashimoto sees himself as a kind of Kanata, lifting a style of forgotten game from obscurity and anachronism, he's not letting on. He is willing to admit that *Lost Sphear* has a deliberately melancholic tone to match its theme. All of his favourite games from childhood ended in sadness and loss, he says.

> ***"We just happen to think that a dozen or so people is the ideal size for this game"***

"That's the mood I want to create here."

Despite the success of Tokyo RPG Factory's debut, the development team has remained the same size for this follow-up. "There's no negative reason for why we haven't expanded the team," says Hashimoto. "We just happen to think that a dozen or so people is the ideal size for a game of this vision and scope." It's a diplomatic answer. As any blockbuster developer knows, balancing the financial costs of large-scale development with the potential sales is a delicate, high-risk enterprise.

Perhaps for this reason, RPGs are increasingly being made by smaller, often wholly independent teams. There was a notable dearth of ambitious studio JRPGs at this year's E3. "It's certainly true that there are fewer games like this being made today," Hashimoto says. "There are various reasons for that. More than anything, the amount it costs to make any kind of game of that size is prohibitive these days. But I like to see that as an opportunity. It is a time for smaller teams like ours to shine through." ■





Assume the position

I Am Setsuna's battle system allowed characters to seamlessly enter battle when encountering a foe on the map. But each combatant was limited to fighting from a predetermined position. In response to criticism, *Lost Sphear* will allow players to direct the positioning of their squad in order to, for example, include as many enemies as possible in a ranged or area attack. "We did a lot of experimentation with different ways you could position team members in battle," Hashimoto says. "The solution we came up with adds a keen strategic element." Hashimoto was unwilling to discuss specific details, but characters will, at some point, be able to wear mystical Vulcosuits to expand their combat options.



ABSOLVER

Sloclap's brave new take on the RPG proves the students can become the masters

Developer Sloclap
Publisher Devolver Digital
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin France
Release August 29

Mr Miyagi said it best: "No such thing as bad student; only bad teacher." Granted, he was talking about karate, not videogames — but we've recalled his words during previous demos of *Absolver*. This online fighting-game RPG overwhelms. There are move timings to master, loadouts to optimise, a combat deck to build and opponents to worry about. We admire, perspire and listen as patient devs explain, but come away defeated. Perhaps, we decide, *Absolver* isn't capable of teaching all that it needs to. But an extended play session at Sloclap's tiny Parisian studio enlightens. Just like Miyagi, *Absolver*, in time, reveals its subtle discipline.

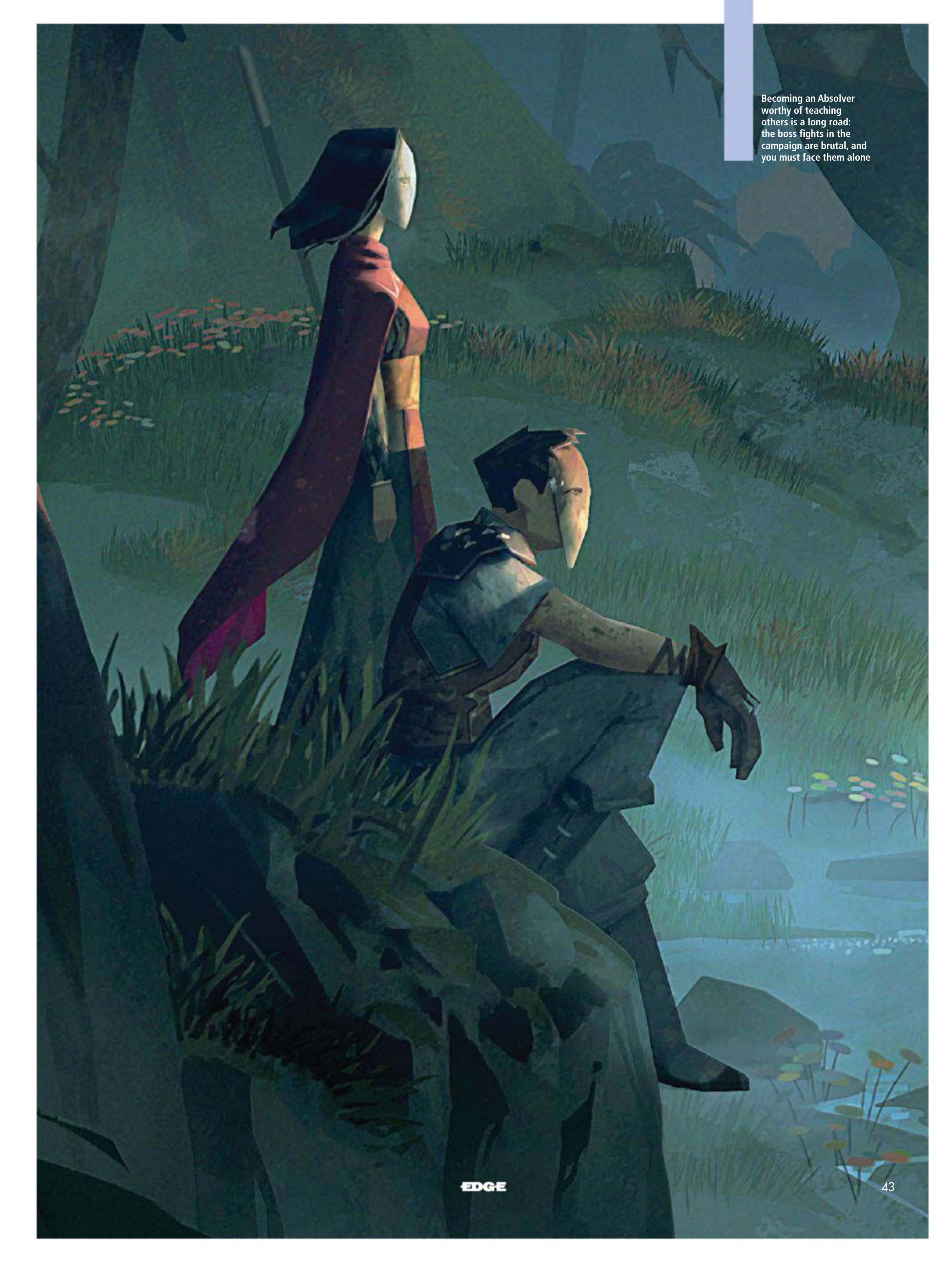
As with all martial arts, *Absolver*'s melee brawling is a test of focus, perception and skill, half-conscious, half-not. Controls are simple — there are only two attack buttons — but execution is key. The secret to success is timing: an on-screen meter pulses throughout the animation of each move, and if you perform the next attack when it reaches the indicator, your moves will chain seamlessly, stunlocking your opponent. It is a huge ask of a new player, requiring immediate precision in an era where fighting games hand out free combos like participation trophies to eager button-mashers. *Absolver* encourages failure at first, because it wants you to truly know and understand your arsenal: the startup on every move, swift or slow; whether a certain kick will hit left or right; the risk and reward of a guard-breaking blow.

"I think it is actually pretty accessible, and it's really easy to pick up and play," creative director **Pierre Tarno** tells us. "You have two attack buttons, your guard, your dodge, and that's it. And if you want to just play that way, you can. But then you've got different layers. Maybe another step will be to stop button-mashing and start doing perfect attacks, and that makes you more efficient."

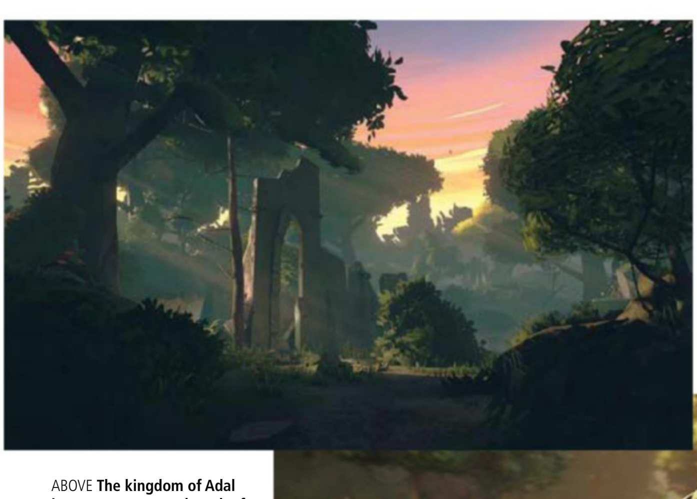
The densely packed systemic layers of *Absolver* rise and expand in their full context, woven throughout the ruined, sun-bleached kingdom of Adal. Other would-be warriors wander, in search of their own victories. NPCs move towards us with urgency, ready for a fight to the death; player characters bow, or gesture, before launching into a sparring match or co-op requests. It's in spontaneous fights that we start pushing ourselves. Our chosen fighting style, Windfall, is dexterity-focused, with a special ability: a unique dodge that, done in time and the right direction, lets us avoid enemy attacks. At first, we're not sure how much it differs from a regular sideways dodge, but we soon realise we can duck high blows and jump low ones, too. ▶



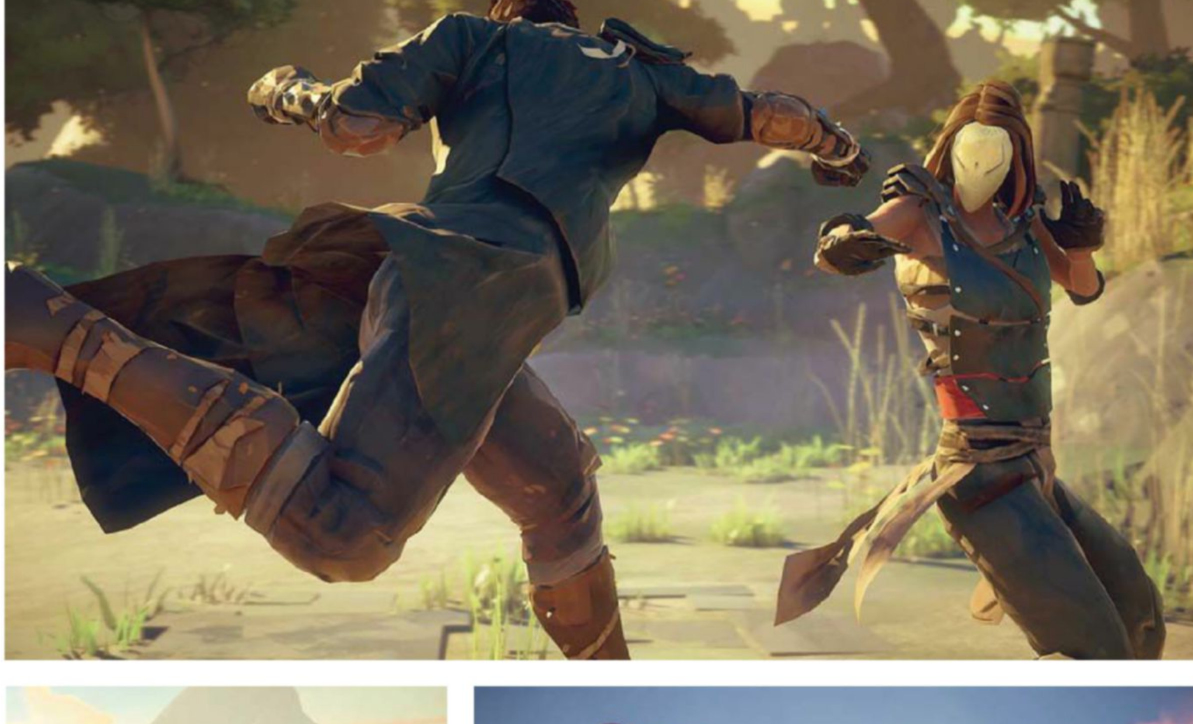
Creative director Pierre Tarno



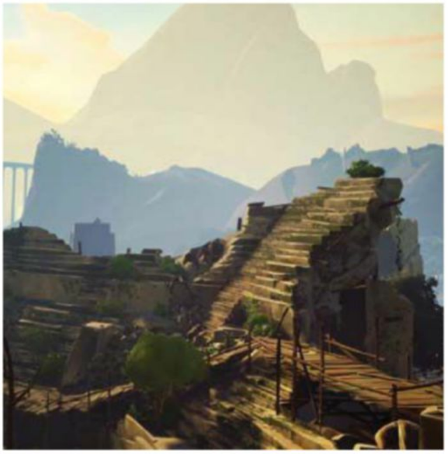
Becoming an Absolver worthy of teaching others is a long road: the boss fights in the campaign are brutal, and you must face them alone







ABOVE **The kingdom of Adal is a sumptuous patchwork of zones. On your travels, you'll rove in fishing villages, jungle, meadows and mysterious towers.**
TOP RIGHT **Social interactions are as much a part of the experience as beating seven bells out of your opponents. We don't see an option to help a fallen player up in our demo; they decompose and respawn too quickly for that.**
MAIN **Go out swinging too often, and your stamina will suffer, leaving you open to attack when it's empty. It only takes a handful of hits to drain it: we are soon scared into being careful.**
BELOW LEFT **The environment can sometimes leave you cornered in a brawl. Tarno tells us that if a competitive ranked mode were to be added into the game, more sparse arenas may be added.**
BELOW RIGHT **Although melee combat is the order of the day, you can spend one of your two charged energy shards to pull a weapon. It offers more damage and changes your stance, but will shatter eventually**







And once we've become confident with the ability, squaring off against different fighting styles has us hungry to learn yet again. Every time we defeat an opponent in one of our four stances, *Absolver*'s smart system rewards us with XP towards certain unlockable moves within said stance. We know we have potential; it's only when we come across a player using the Khalt style, which lets them absorb the damage from an enemy hit via a perfectly timed input, that we start to consider developing it and becoming competitive. Indeed, this is exactly what Tarno and his team are after. "In a traditional fighting game, if you're fighting Dhalsim, you know his moves. You know the character. It's all about knowing your matchup. In *Absolver*, when you fight somebody else, you don't know what their moves are going be. So there's that permanent adaptation to the moves of the opponent that's going be a very interesting thing in competitive play."

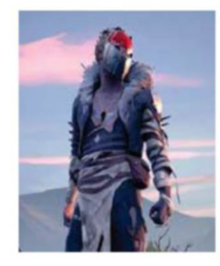


Our dive into the combat-deck menu is less into clear water, more a murky sludge; seemingly vacant 'new move' notifications and strange layouts make an already intimidating process worse. Once we finally manage to do so, replacing the low kick at the end of our top-left stance combo with a Triangle-triggered alternative punch will now automatically throw us into our top-right stance and moveset – no more awkward thumbstick twiddling for us. When we meet the same Khalt opponent again, our swift stance-switching, combined with some practised feinting, catches them off guard. Every time we goad them into their absorbing move, and every time, we punish it. Later, in a cooperative effort versus a miniboss, we purposefully change to a stance with a thrust attack so as not to smack our partner while fighting alongside them. Slowly but surely, we catch ourselves wrapping ourselves in new layers, taking arms against a sea of troubles: parries, weapons, crowd control, and on it goes.

And when you finally feel you've learnt all you can from *Absolver*, you can turn to others. Those who have proven their mastery in the campaign are able to start their own martial-arts schools in-game, founded on their own unique stance combinations. These are available from the get-go: meet a player who's part of one, and you can also choose to join. It means even casual players can quickly find a strong playstyle. Even if you're more experienced, but get bested by a tricky moveset, it's worth pinning your colours to that particular mast for the time being. "Since the schools are built around movesets, we're going to see the best ones spread virally," Tarno says. "If we see something too powerful, we're going to rebalance it. But mostly, I think the meta is going to balance [itself]. One dominant strategy will start to emerge, so somebody is going to find the counter-moveset." It's not all about high-level play, however. Tarno fondly recalls the time he and another player struck up a partnership purely on account of having the same haircut. Ultimately, he says, "it's a combat game that's about making friends."

> ***"Since the schools are built around movesets, we'll see the best ones spread virally"***

And a weird one; *Absolver* is certainly an acquired taste. The danger, of course, is limbo: fighting game enthusiasts turning away from a 1v1 experience they feel is too unpredictable, purposely designed to lack fixed, learnable movesets; RPG fans frustrated by the complexity of the melee brawling aspects. But with Sloclap's school concept in place, and such an inventive and well-executed genre mashup on show, we allow ourselves a degree of optimism. Naturally, it is even harder for Tarno. "On my good days," he says, "I'm like, 'This could be a hit, we're going to be okay.' And on the bad days, I'm like, 'People are going to like it but it's going to be niche.' We'll see. One thing is for sure: I'm not just focusing on the sales of the month of release. Because I think that it's a game that will grow." Based on our apprenticeship with it so far, it's not merely the game that has the potential to adapt and improve. With patience and time, like any good sensei, *Absolver* shows itself more than capable of teaching whomsoever is willing to learn. ■



Counter couture

The garments of *Absolver* have their roots in real fashion: Croatian designer Damir Doma lent his expert eye to many pieces of the game's gear. "We were inspired by some of his work," Tarno tells us. "He came to the studio here, we visited his studio in Milan. They did drafts of what Absolvers' masks could look like, sent us loads of references from their work, and that sort of inspired our work on this." Tarno hopes that *Absolver*'s fashion will even become a kind of language in itself. "There's the whole social aspect of you meeting people and telling yourself a story when you see somebody. How does that person fight? She's dressed all in black with a red mask. Is she going to be bad, or is she going to be nice?"



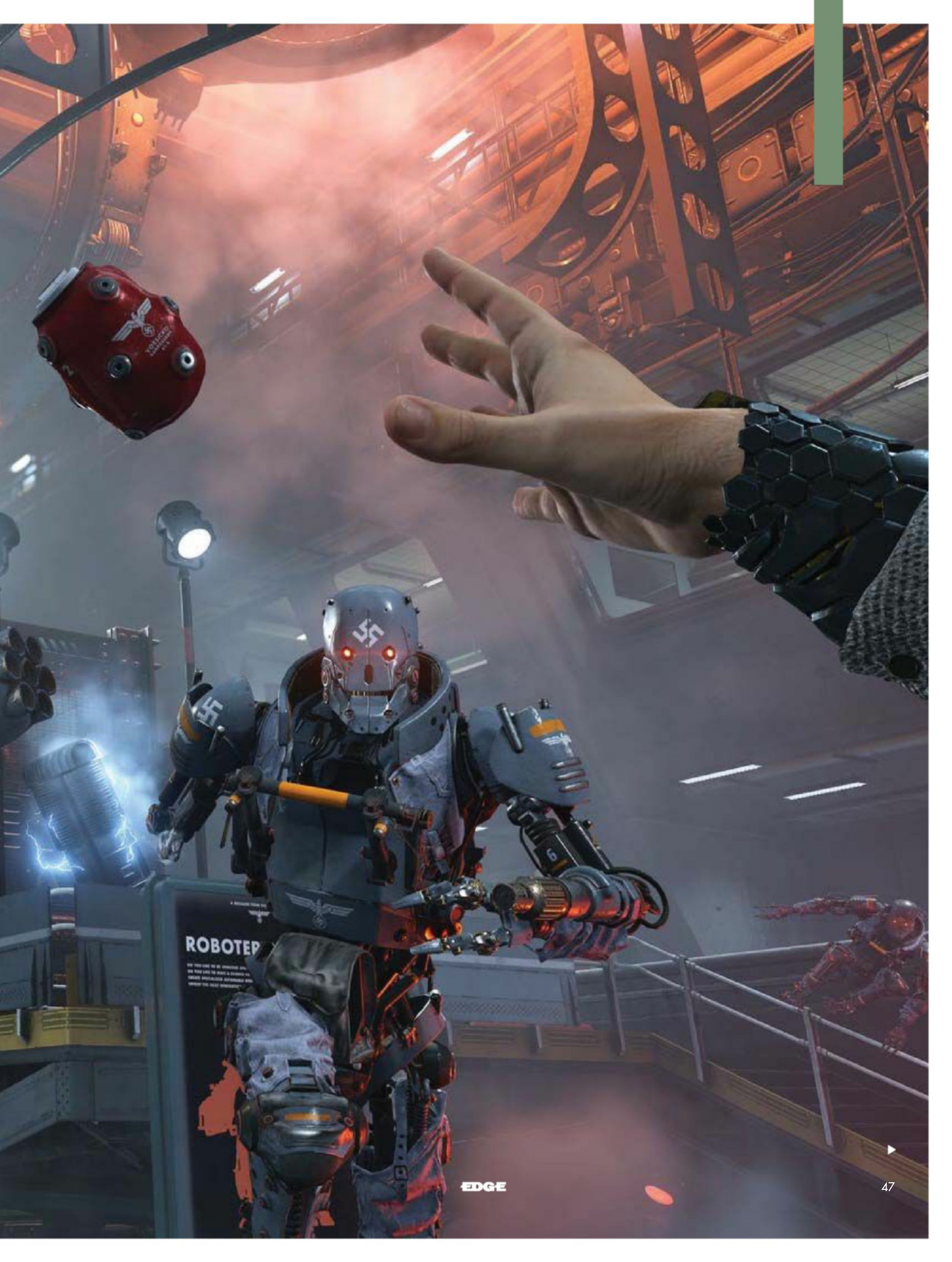
HYPE

WOLFENSTEIN II: THE NEW COLOSSUS

BJ Blazkowicz returns to his homeland, and is in for a Nazi surprise

Developer	MachineGames
Publisher	Bethesda Softworks
Format	PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin	Sweden
Release	October 27

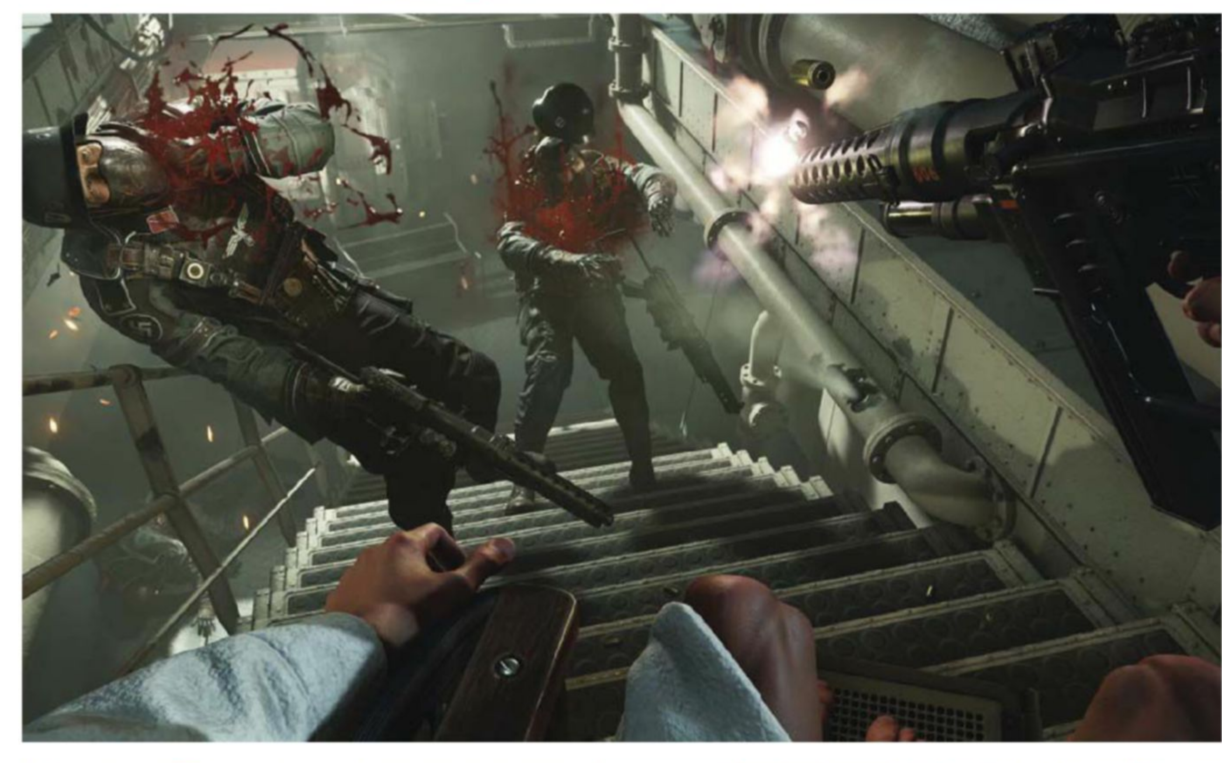
In Area 52 you'll fight hordes of Nazi soldiers and swastika-stamped robots with glaring red eyes. It's a difficult game, and charging blindly into a firefight will result in little more than a quick death


ROBOTER





ABOVE **If they sniff you out, these cyborg attack dogs will pounce. They can sense you without needing to see you, which can be something of a problem if you're after a stealthy approach.**
TOP RIGHT **Blazkowicz's new high-tech exosuit grants him superhuman strength, allowing you to execute enemies by hurling axes directly into their heads.**
MAIN **You're consigned to a wheelchair for the entire opening level, which takes place on Eva's Hammer, the Nazi submarine captured at the end of *The New Order*.**
BELOW LEFT **In *Wolfenstein*'s alternate history, the Nazis crushed the Allies and won the Second World War thanks to the development of advanced technology. Their war machine is even stronger in *The New Colossus*, forcing the resistance to resort to guerrilla tactics.**
BELOW RIGHT **The bright, busy streets of Nazi-occupied America are a nice change from the medieval castles and overcast skies usually associated with *Wolfenstein*. Among the other places Blazkowicz visits are New Mexico and New Orleans**









WOLFENSTEIN II: THE NEW COLOSSUS

The New Colossus takes its name from the sonnet engraved at the base of the Statue Of Liberty. But now that the Nazis have occupied America, the line about the huddled masses yearning to breathe free has taken on a dark new meaning. It's a bitter homecoming for BJ Blazkowicz, whose beloved country is now draped in swastikas and patrolled by jackbooted stormtroopers. Undeterred, he joins a ragtag resistance group and embarks upon a series of guerrilla missions to bring down the Nazi war machine, beginning in the desert town of Roswell, New Mexico.

Swedish developer MachineGames winningly describes *The New Colossus'* vibrant aesthetic as 'Germericana' – a romantic vision of '60s America perverted by the Nazis. As we walk through the town on our way to meet a fellow resistance member, the extent of the occupation becomes clear. A parade is taking place, and thousands of Nazi soldiers are goose-stepping through the sunny, idyllic streets. The marriage of dreamy Americana and Nazi propaganda is striking, like a fascist reimagining of Disney's Main Street, USA.

Wolfenstein II is a lavish production, and there's a remarkable amount of hand-crafted detail squeezed into environments that we're free to explore at our leisure. Our journey through Roswell ends in a diner, where Blazkowicz has a tense run-in with a milkshake-slurping Nazi who seems to recognise him – probably because of the enormous wanted posters pasted up all over town. But he's called away by his superiors seconds before our cover is blown, a close call that will be familiar to anyone who played *The New Order*. The diner's owner, who happens to be our resistance contact, whisks us away to safety before we can get in any more trouble.



Blazkowicz is making his way to Area 52, an underground weapons facility which in happier times was operated by the Americans, with a nuclear bomb strapped to his back. He's going to blow it up, naturally, but first has to make his way through a horde of stormtroopers, hulking Nazi mechs, and vicious German Shepherds first. The level will be familiar territory for *Wolfenstein* vets, an industrial maze of catwalks, crawlspaces and corridors that gives you the option to sneak past some enemies. But it's when the guns come out that *Wolfenstein* is at its best. Gunplay is weighty and refined, with dramatic weaponry and a chaotic, breakneck pace.

But you could say the same for *The New Order*. Setting and artistic direction aside, this sequel isn't a dramatic reinvention, but rather a refinement of the game we played in 2014. There's a distinct tinge of familiarity as we dual-wield and sprint-slide our way around Area 52. The level ends with Blazkowicz successfully planting the bomb and escaping by train. The narrow carriages, stuffed as they are with stormtroopers and Terminator-like Nazi robots, make this level a gruesomely satisfying meat grinder, with stacks of bodies and spent bullets piling up in our hero's wake.

As a result of injuries sustained in the previous game, Blazkowicz's health never goes above 50 in this level. You can briefly overcharge it, but it'll always trickle back down. To make up for this he's equipped with a high-tech exosuit that lets him sprint at an incredible speeds – which comes in handy in a game where running out of ammunition is a regular occurrence. We spend much of our demo breaking away from gunfights to scoop up ammo, although Bethesda assures us that the build we play is still being balanced.

Bringing Blazkowicz to a warped, Nazi-ruled United States is an inspired idea

The imaginative, exaggerated alternate history established in *The New Order* is even more outlandish in the sequel, and it's arguably the most exciting thing about the game. MachineGames' knack for grotesque characters, overblown action, novelty set-pieces and engaging storytelling should hopefully make up for the feeling that *Wolfenstein II* is, in some respects, retreading old ground. The 2014 reboot was a bold turn for a series most people had forgotten about; perhaps inevitably, its sequel comes stripped of that sense of freshness, and the new setting can only do so much to remedy that. Yet while it may not surprise us like its predecessor, *The New Colossus* is all but guaranteed to delight. ■

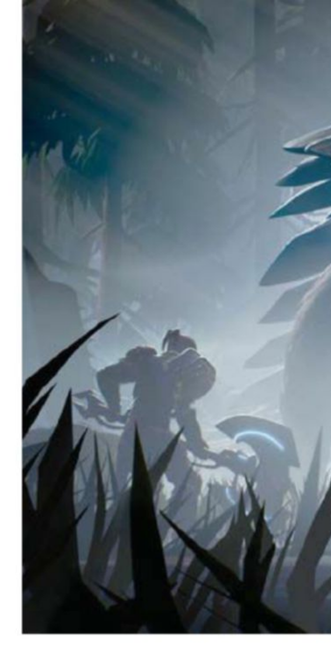


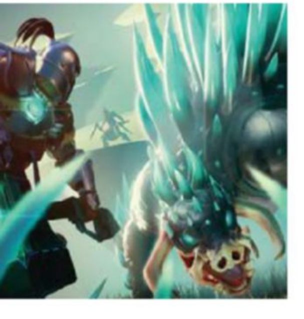
Wheels of steel

The opening level of *The New Colossus* sees Blazkowicz – who is still recovering from the events of *The New Order* – rolling around in a wheelchair. One arm is used to push himself along, while the other cradles a machine pistol. It's ludicrous, certainly, but dispatching hordes of Nazis as you trundle through the claustrophobic submarine is hugely entertaining. The level is littered with energy fields, similar to *Dishonored*'s walls of light, that cause anyone who passes through them to horribly explode. And you can use these to your advantage, switching them on and off, and luring enemies into them. It's a preposterous introduction, but sets the tone perfectly and illustrates the superhuman resilience of our square-jawed hero.



Developer/Publisher Phoenix Labs
Format PC
Origin Canada
Release 2017





DAUNTLESS

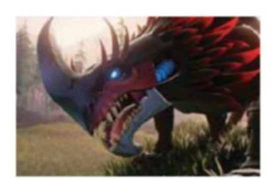
A co-op RPG that's out to bring monster hunting to the masses

Felling a beast the size of a modest skyscraper is a universal videogame fantasy – using its parts to fashion yourself a fancy new pair of kicks, perhaps even more so. Despite this, the *Monster Hunter* series has never really managed to win over the west. Capcom's forthcoming *Monster Hunter: World* is looking to change this, of course, extending a friendly hand to all with a worldwide, multiplatform release. There's nothing quite as accessible as 'free', though, is there?

Canadian developer Phoenix Labs knows this. But then, Phoenix Labs knows a lot of things. Founded by a team of former Riot Games devs, and since bolstered by more hires from Blizzard, BioWare and Capcom, the developer is well-placed to snag a section of this genre's territory. *Dauntless* is its champion: an action-RPG with a focus on co-op that's free to play, certainly, but which our demo suggests is far from cheap.

What might have been a bloated swathe of open world is instead a selection of sandboxes that fit neatly within the game's lore: following a cataclysmic event, the world has shattered into sky islands menaced by man-eating Behemoths. Once you've gathered up to three friends in the social hub, fast travelling to your prey's particular hunk of rock starts a hunt. Although the areas we explore are markedly similar in design (and a little empty, barring a couple of nervous deer-like creatures) they, too, look expensive. Ethereal fingers of light stretch through trees, over the cartoony grass and our stylised Slayer. Up ahead, a red flare explodes in the sky: a pal has found the Behemoth.

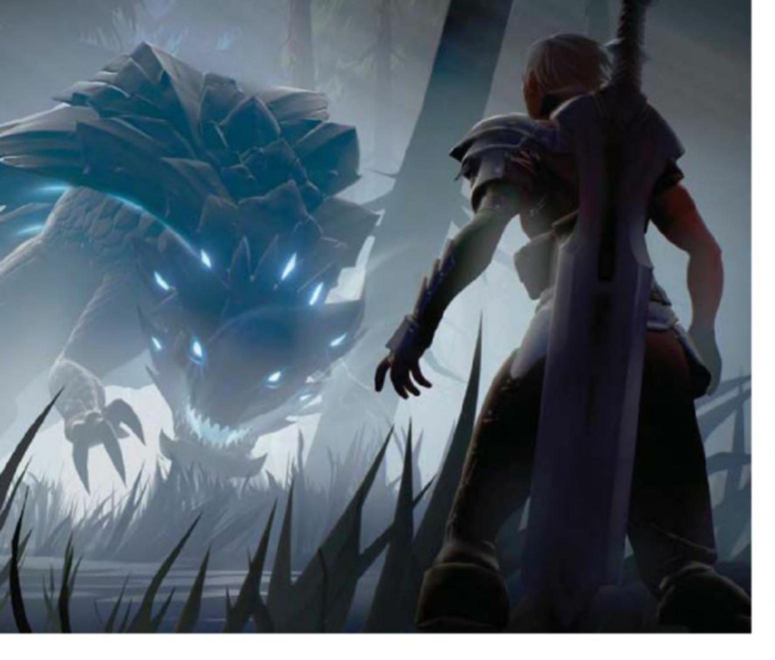
This one is a Shrike, part-owl, part-bear, all sweep attacks and nasty divebombs. And



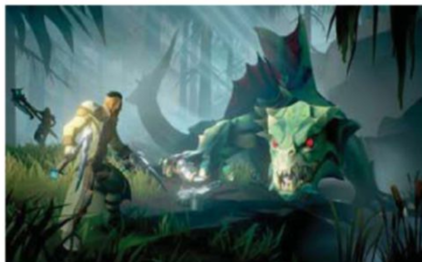
The Embermane is a sort of cross between a dragon, a lion and a rhinoceros, with the handy bonus of being able to breathe fire

A stamina meter attempts to introduce an extra layer of strategy to combat, although it rarely gives us any trouble





LEFT **Fighting the Pangar depletes our health potions. More HP can be harvested from aether fissures in the ground, but a long animation makes it a risky move.**
BELOW **Chain blades might not be the best choice for every battle; if we want to break off bone for crafting, a hammer would be better**





ground-pounds. Oh, and tornadoes whipped up by its wings. And did we mention the talon slide-tackles? It's an intimidating and varied moveset. Each assault is subtly signposted in advance, though briefly enough to constantly catch us by surprise. We're not troubled enough to use our special moves, but there's responsiveness and depth to even the basic combat which, like seemingly everything these days, cites the *Souls* games as a point of reference. Vague hitboxes and feather-light sword swings soon tell the real story. A preferable one: with Behemoths not staggered by blows, fights are weighted in their favour. A balanced cooperative challenge is, it seems, the priority.

Well, balance and loot. The latter takes the form of cores of varying rarity, containing crafting materials with which to smith weapons and armour. As in *Monster Hunter*, targeting certain parts of Behemoths will result in specific drops. Plenty of weapons can only be created with a smattering of Shrike beak, for example; still more powerful ones might mean having to chop bits off a tougher beast, such as the icy, armadillo-like Pangar. More challenging hunts require communication and preparation: there are no player classes in *Dauntless*, so team composition is a matter of loadouts. A set of chain blades in hand, and some Berserker potions on the D-pad, for instance, makes us the DPS to our partner's tanky build.

Each weapon has its own perks; usually one or two offer some mobility. While our partner's rocket hammer can propel them into the air to get the drop on our prey, our chain blades are even slipperier stuff. When a panicked Pangar rolls away from us during a second, more difficult hunt, we can throw our blades at its flank and reel ourselves in. The same ability up close will propel us away with a backflip. In theory, this is a bit of smart design that will have us slashing and slicing about like a buttered Bayonetta. In practice, things don't go so smoothly.

Each weapon has its own perks; usually one or two offer some mobility

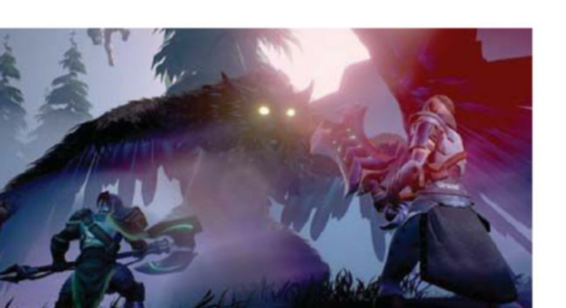
Our prey constantly harasses our friend, as they're doing most of the damage, leaving us to chase after its very fast, very rangey roll. Using our chain blades to whizz back into the fray isn't always effective: there's no indication of the move's range, making it difficult to execute consistently. For a choice that's meant to favour manoeuvrability over raw damage, it's disappointing.

But then, we're not fighting as a full foursome. And with a full release set for 2018, there's plenty of time for tweaks to the smaller stuff. The crucial takeaway for now is that not once do we feel lost in overly complex crafting, or frustrated by slow animations while chugging health potions mid-fight – and in that Pangar battle, we're knocking plenty back. Making a beast-slaying RPG accessible, after all, shouldn't mean making an easy game: just one that's easy to get on with. If its free-to-play structure manages to be as agreeable as its co-op combat, *Dauntless* might just be a hunter's new best friend. ■

Founder's keepers

The term 'free-to-play' inevitably attracts suspicion; plenty of games have promised a smooth, cash-free experience, only to lock key weapons and items behind paywalls. Phoenix Labs is keen to stress that this won't be the case in *Dauntless*. We're told players will only have to part with real money for cosmetic items, contained in special Chroma Cores, which are filled with armour dye to add gradient colours of alternate finishes, transmog stones, banners, differently coloured flares and more. You'll have to pay up for a cosmetic pack in order to get guaranteed access to the Founder's Alpha and Closed Beta this summer, however.

Lanterns offer party-wide buffs of health or shields when activated, but charge very slowly, meaning dinner is probably served for this attacking Shrike



Developer
Ben Esposito
Publisher
Annapurna Interactive
Format PC
Origin US
Release TBA





DONUT COUNTY

A quirky physics puzzler that questions the greater hole

Animals do what feels good. Put aside experience, conditioning and morality, and natural behaviour follows a pattern of simple gratification. If you've got an itch, you scratch it. If it smells good, you eat it. And if you control a hole in the ground, and there's a space filled with things to put into that hole in the ground – and it feels satisfying to put said things into said hole in the ground – chances are, you're going to do it.

That impulse is what **Ben Esposito** is counting on; *Donut County* revels in it. Like *Katamari Damacy*, it's an irresistible exercise in tidying up. Chunky, colourful levels are cluttered with stuff: lawn chairs, clay pots, grass, donuts, horrified civilians. But this time, the player is a raccoon that's found itself in control of an all-consuming hole.

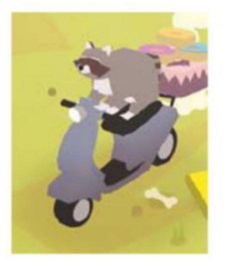
> ***"I knew it was something that would make people feel good, make them feel weird…"***

We've wielded it before, but in this latest build, moving the mouse has the hole careen about the screen with a particularly pleasing elasticity. It swallows anything small enough to fit inside. The more it's filled, the wider it grows, until it's capable of gobbling entire houses. Simple, but worryingly pleasurable. "The game came from the silly idea of the hole in the ground," Esposito tells us. "I didn't know it was going to be good until I built it. Once I had it in front of me and I was moving the hole around, I was like 'This feels so satisfying – and it shouldn't.' I tried to play into that as much as I could."

As in *Katamari*, this conflict between systems and sentiment transforms *Donut County* from cute physics puzzler into darkly humorous guilt trip. It might feel great to send ever more improbable objects tumbling into the void, but we're constantly shown the cost of binge-eating a living, breathing world. Empty a level, and fulfillment fizzles into regret; we look upon our works and despair, a once-peaceful backyard or chicken farm now barren dirt as the music becomes plaintive. It's a change from the wacky spinning donut that levels used to finish with. Esposito has put careful thought into ending scenes now: "Hopefully lingering on that, and having you sit in that, will give you that back-and-forth between cute and fun, and 'Holy shit'. I try to push it in both directions."

Mostly, it's a mad toy game, progressing through idle, organic puzzling. Deciding whether the hole's big enough to gulp down a huge rock must be done by eye (unlike *Katamari,* there's purposefully no indication of size ticking up on-screen), while easing in an awkwardly shaped plank is a physics-based scramble, and there's light logic in spinning a sign to scare the chicken perched on it. But flash-forward cutaways to the void reveal broken furniture, bits of mountains, and furry, furious victims. "As the raccoon, you don't understand what's wrong, because you're the player and you're having fun," Esposito says. "But the player understands this raccoon is a fool, and hopefully then you can sympathise with the people who live there." *Donut County* is, for all its goofiness, faintly allegorical of the gentrification of Los Angeles.

It's a strange game – and a strange way to spend five years, but Esposito is still hesitant to pin down a release date. As he's grown as a writer and his priorities have changed, so have *Donut County*'s. "It's sure as hell been hard to work on," he tells us. "But the reason I never quit is because that first day when I had the hole in the ground, I knew it was something that would make people uncomfortable, make them feel good, make them feel weird… It's something that you can't just throw a bunch of mechanics together and get. It'll have a very human reaction, and I know I can get that reaction." Indeed, we have a very weird, very good feeling about it. ■

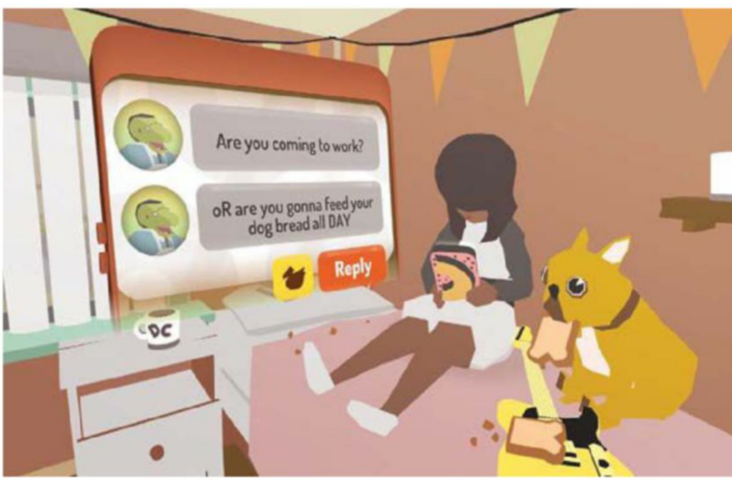


System shock

There is, we note, the tiniest suggestion of Brenda Romero's politically charged tabletop games in *Donut County*. Esposito is modest, but agrees. "It's a good metaphor for capitalism, putting you in a game system. Here are the rules; when you get good you can figure out how to exploit it. But the thing that is not captured in the game system, or capitalism, are the externalities. Who's taking the hit? Is it the environment? The people working for you? That's why Brenda's stuff is so interesting: there's a real emotional and historical context for it. My game is not very serious, but I'm thinking about the same stuff, in terms of you actually have to answer to all of the people you put in the hole."

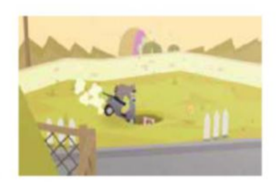




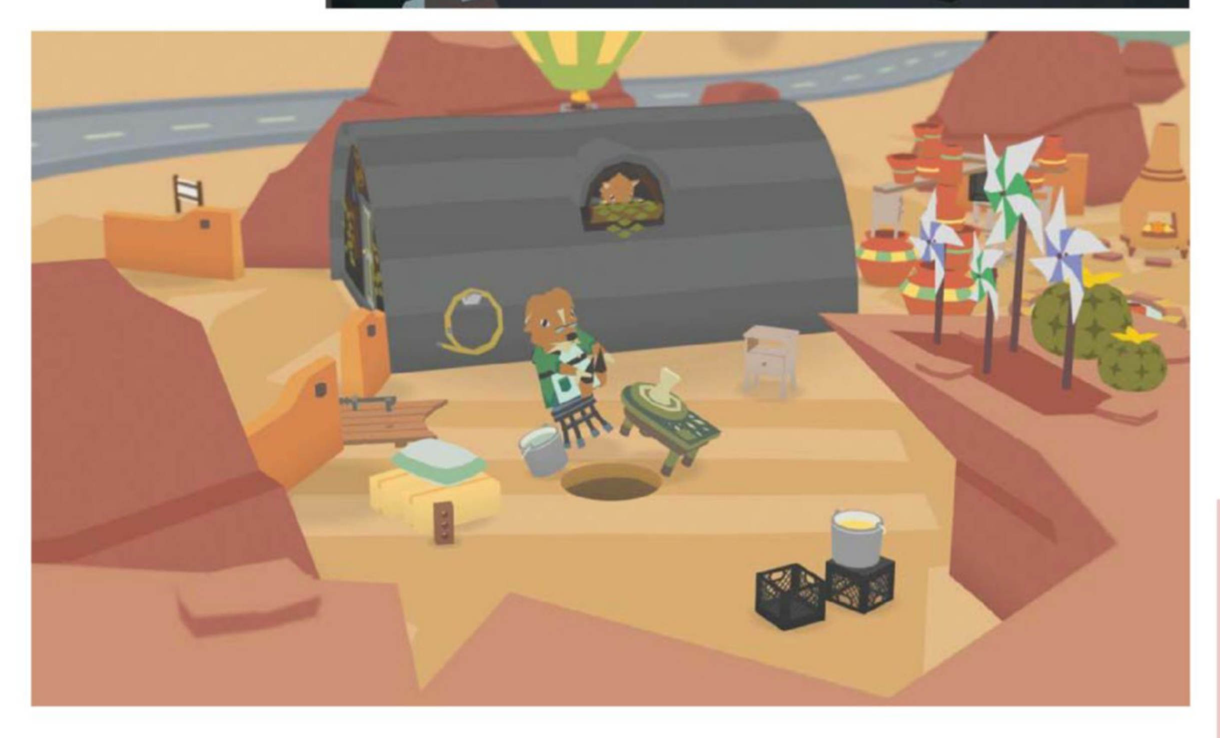


TOP **The chicken farmer's coop is beset by snakes – and then, the hole. "All of these people's worries become realised by the hole, and that's what destroys them," Esposito says.**
RIGHT **Years of development have taken *Donut County* from fun toy to something more, Esposito says. "It's me growing up, my priorities changing, and what I want to talk about changing."**
BELOW **Levels are more detailed than in previous versions. The aim is to make each place feel like a real home; the objects you're swallowing have to feel meaningful, we're told**





TOP **Our demo starts in shop worker Mira's bedroom. She spams duck emojis at her boss, and he responds in kind. The hole's too good for 'em, if you ask us.**
ABOVE **This motorised bandit is actually *Donut County*'s real troublemaker. Esposito recently restructured the game's story to make this more obvious to players**





CALL OF DUTY: WWII

Developer Sledgehammer Games **Publisher** Activision **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** US **Release** November 3



Once a Treyarch joint, Zombies has become as seemingly vital a part of the annual *COD* package as the campaign or multiplayer mode – and here it is again, even though it's somewhat at odds with Sledgehammer Games' drive for authenticity. It's seemingly shorn of at least some of the pulpy campness of its recent predecessors, while a dark, blood-slicked aesthetic reminds you that Sledgehammer heads Michael Condrey and Glen Schofield made their names with *Dead Space*. David Tennant, Ving Rhames, Udo Kier and Elodie Yung are among the names lending their talents to the most appealing *Call Of Duty* game in years.

NOITA

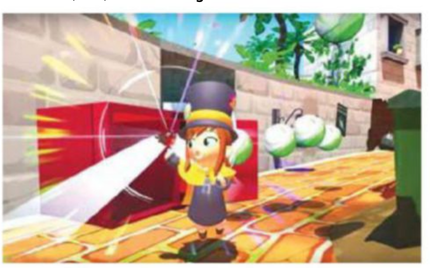
Developer/publisher Nolla Games **Format** PC **Origin** Finland **Release** TBA



Nolla is a Finnish indie supergroup of sorts, comprising Olli Harjola (*The Swapper*), Petri Purho (*Crayon Physics Deluxe*) and Arvi Teikari (*Environmental Station Alpha*). The trio's debut is a procedurally generated 2D Roguelike; nothing new, you'd think, until you learn that every pixel is physically simulated, letting you burn, melt, freeze or simply blast away everything in the level. It's an intriguing spin on an old formula, from a dev whose pedigree is beyond reproach.

A HAT IN TIME

Developer Gears For Breakfast **Publisher** Humble Bundle Presents **Format** PC, PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Denmark **Release** Autumn



Four years after passing its Kickstarter target – and over three years since backers were promised final code – this cheery 3D platformer is finally almost here. A 2016 beta build was charming, but had plenty of problems; we hope all that development time has seen those rough edges sanded down.

KINGDOM HEARTS III

Developer/publisher Square Enix **Format** PS4, Xbox One **Origin** Japan **Release** 2018



Square Enix's forthcoming baffling Disney JRPG has been 12 years in the making, but the sumptuous new Toy Story section goes some way to justifying it. It's the headline attraction, but Tangled and Big Hero 6 will also feature in a game that, while likely as hatstand as ever, will at least look the part this time.

FIGHTING EX LAYER

Developer/publisher Arika **Format** PS4 **Origin** Japan **Release** 2018



The latest from *Street Fighter EX* series developer Arika was announced on April Fool's Day, and widely dismissed as a gag. Yet the studio made the game official during fighting-game tournament Evo 2017. The main draw is bizarre fan favourite Skullomania, and a beta is due before the year is out.



GET IT ON
Google play



Available on the
App Store



zinio

SUBSCRIBE TO

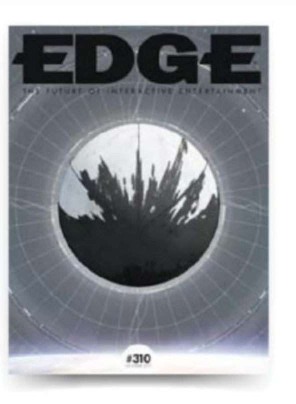
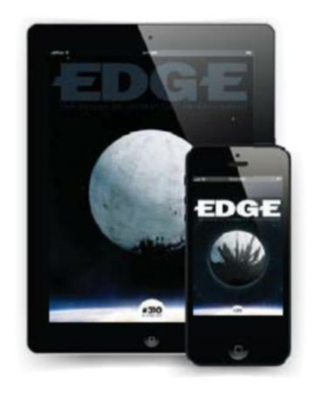




WHEREVER YOU ARE IN THE WORLD

Quarterly prices

IN THE UK? SEE PAGE 30

	PRINT	DIGITAL	PRINT+DIGITAL
			 BEST VALUE
Europe	€22	€9	€28
US	$22	$9	$29
Rest of the world	$24	$9	$31

Choose a **print subscription** and get every issue of **Edge** delivered to your door for less than you'd pay in the shops and with exclusive subscriber-only covers.

Choose a **digital subscription** and get every issue of **Edge** on iOS and Android delivered on the UK on-sale date.

Get the best value with the **print + digital package**: instant access to the digital edition on the UK on-sale date, plus a print copy with exclusive, subscriber-only cover, to your door.

SUBSCRIBE NOW myfavouritemagazines.co.uk/edgesubs

#310

VIDEOGAME CULTURE, DEVELOPMENT, PEOPLE AND TECHNOLOGY



S P A C E



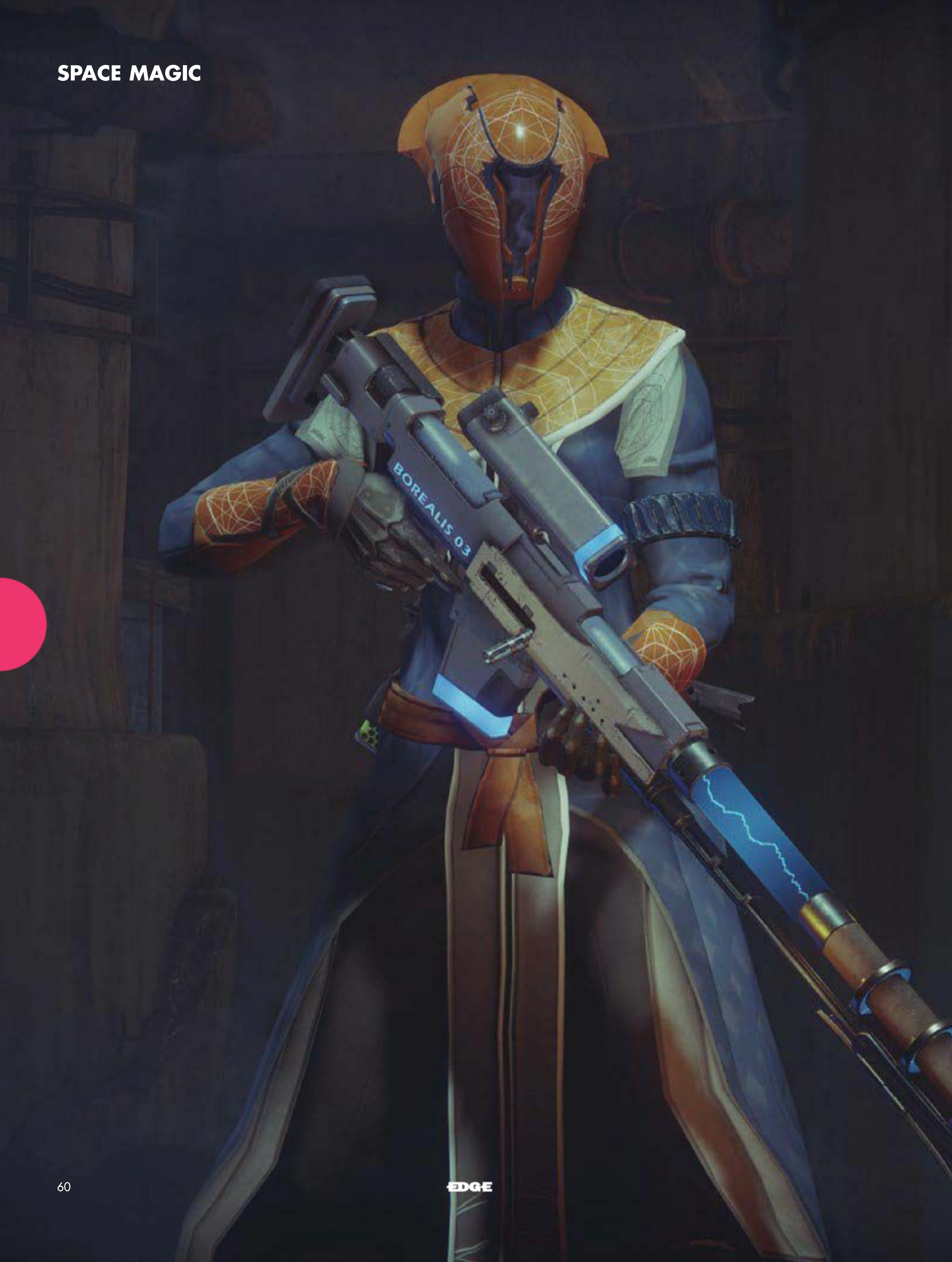
Bungie tees up the next step in its grand galactic adventure

By Nathan Brown

M A G I C

There's nothing quite like *Destiny*. But, like so many other games, it began life as a series of concepts: of keywords and phrases, setting high-level creative goals for the team at Bungie, that were laid out in 2009 by design director Jason Jones. **Luke Smith** – back then a mere designer, and today *Destiny 2*'s game director – remembers two in particular. 'We want to make a game like golf' was one; if you've been following *Destiny 2*'s development you may have heard Smith refer to the good walk spoiled, and the analogy fits. Golf, like *Destiny*, is a game you can play competitively, or for fun. You can watch it instead of playing it. You can be terrible at it, but still enjoy it. It is better played with friends, as much a social occasion as a sporting one. You carry with you a set of tools, and must decide which is best for the job at hand. *Destiny*, a game about killing robots and wizards on alien planets using superpowers and magical guns, is the best golf game ever made.

Golf, then, is a driving source of creative inspiration for one of the most intoxicating shooters on the market. Yet it is an idea that needs explaining in order to be properly appreciated: as an elevator pitch, 'An FPS, but golf' hardly sets the pulse racing. The other concept Smith remembers from 2009, however, is a succinct, crystal-clear, simply perfect summary of why players in their millions fell in love with *Destiny*, for all its flaws – and seem set to do the same all over again in its sequel. When Smith first told us the phrase, during a sprawling interview after *Destiny 2*'s unveiling in Los Angeles in May, we told him Bungie should put it on T-shirts. It deserves its own line; its own paragraph. No: its own page.


BOREALIS 03

Game *Destiny 2*
Developer Bungie
Publisher Activision
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Release September 6

SHOOTING ALIENS IS FUCKING RELAXING.

ABOVE **Crucible play is now far more defined by teamwork; the new 4v4 structure means sticking together is a smart play.** RIGHT **The Titan Sentinel subclass plays up to the shield-flinging Captain America fantasy, but can also access a defensive Ward Of Dawn bubble**

YOU PLAY WITH MUSCLE MEMORY AND INSTINCT, THE CONTROLLER MELTING INTO YOUR HANDS

OK, sure, there are times in both *Destiny* and its sequel where the action is anything but serene. Raid bosses are fought with teeth firmly clenched. And there are plenty of moments during *Destiny 2*'s story campaign – which we have played in its entirety – where we find ourselves hunkered desperately behind cover urging our shields to start recharging, or scrabbling around manically, our guns empty, hoovering up ammo pickups like a Roomba gone haywire. Yet at its core, *Destiny* is an uncommonly relaxing take on humanity going to war with an endless conveyor belt of angry alien monsters. You play with muscle memory and instinct, the controller melting into your hands as you tear through enemy factions with your co-op buddies. Smith once described *Destiny* to us as "the bar I can go to when I get home, where I can wear my pyjamas and shoot the shit with my friends". You're there notionally to drink, but it's a social occasion above all. You go to the golf course to hit balls into holes, sure, but you're really there to hang out and talk.

Conversation is a key theme for *Destiny 2*, a driving factor behind many of the changes Bungie has made to the game's mechanical template. Some endgame activities will lock your loadout, for instance, preventing you from changing your weapons or subclass after you load into a mission, requiring that you and your fireteam devise a plan before setting out. The weekly Nightfall – once the most attritional activity in all of *Destiny*, a rock-hard fight against overlevelled bullet-sponge enemies, that kicked you back to orbit if your entire team died – is now a timed challenge. The limit will vary (Smith gives 13 minutes as an example), but you'll need to be efficient as well as effective – something which will only be possible if a team settles on a strategy beforehand, then properly executes it. Much of the first *Destiny* was designed around difficulty as a question of persistence; the sequel pitches it as a matter of planning and skill.

"We're looking at difficulty as a way to drive conversations," Smith tells us. "Do you have the right tools? Are you looking into your backpack to see what you have? You should totally have favourites – if you have a favourite hand cannon then awesome, great, you should use it. But I also think there should be times where you're like, 'You're not the right tool for this job'. So you look at your entire golf bag and say, 'OK, what do I have?'"

The idea is most deeply rooted in the new – and somewhat controversial – way in which weapons are classified in *Destiny 2*. In the previous game, you had primary weapons (rifles, hand cannons and the like); secondaries (snipers, shotguns, sidearms and the charge-firing fusion rifles); and heavies (rocket launchers, machine guns and swords). In the sequel, heavies and most secondaries have been bundled together in a single slot, and are now known as Power weapons. The other two slots are for what used to be called primaries: Kinetic weapons fire standard, ballistic bullets, while the Energy variants add elemental effects, dealing bonus damage to enemies with appropriately coloured shields.

It's a change that has not gone down well with the *Destiny* community. Players see it as evidence of Bungie being so desperate to fix longstanding problems in the Crucible, the game's PVP component – where shotguns and snipers have long reigned infuriatingly, instakillingly supreme – at the expense of the PVE game, where it seems as if options have been taken away from players. Smith readily admits the change has been at least partly implemented to make life easier for Bungie's design teams – "It's about, as a designer, being able to understand how much power a player is going to be able to bring to bear," he says – but stresses there are benefits to players in both modes. The game's ▶


Game director Luke Smith

IF YOU WANT YOUR NEXT GRENADE MORE QUICKLY, YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO WORK FOR IT



BRACED FRAME

Given that last year's *Rise Of Iron* expansion saw Bungie abandon support for Xbox 360 and PS3, many thought that the studio would usher in *Destiny 2* with an increase in framerate. Yet Bungie has declined to do so. In an era where 60fps is fast becoming the accepted standard on console, is 30fps good enough? A thousand hours on our Destiny save file suggests it is, yes, thanks for asking; in any case, executive producer Mark Noseworthy suggests we shouldn't expect that to change any time soon.

"It's about the simulation of the *Destiny* world," he says. "Thirty AI at once, large open spaces, six players, sometimes with vehicles, and dropships coming in; *that*'s where we're using the CPU. Could we make a *Destiny* game that ran at 60fps? Yes, but the space would be smaller, it would be less cooperative, and there'd be fewer monsters to shoot. That's not the game we want to make. First and foremost, we're trying to make an incredible action game. We don't feel we've been held back by the choices we've made about world simulation versus framerate; in fact we think we're offering a player experience you can't have elsewhere because of the choices we're making. But if framerate is something that's really important to you, there is a platform now where you can spend as much money as you want, to go as fast as you want." On PC, in addition to offering 4K visuals, *Destiny 2*'s framerate will be uncapped.

beta did not contain the final implementation of how Energy weapons work against AI combatants with elemental shields, for instance. When the shield is depleted, it explodes, nuking any enemies that happen to be nearby.

Yet beneath the spectacle lies, once again, the team's desire to make players plan ahead and talk. Smith asks us to picture running the Vault Of Glass, the first (and still best) *Destiny* raid, using the *Destiny 2* weapon system. "Imagine the conversation you're going to have when you're about to do the Oracle phase," he says, referring to a section where players must quickly take down a series of randomly spawning spheres of light – and will be instantly killed if they miss even one before it disappears after a few seconds – while also dealing with waves of high-level enemies. "Who's bringing a sniper rifle? Who's bringing a fusion rifle for the Minotaurs? You're now putting those powerful things in conflict with a rocket launcher, which is for AOE wave clearing and can effectively replace something like a Nova Bomb [a highly damaging Super move belonging to the Warlock class]. Well, now, Nova Bomb could be more important, because not everybody's running with a sniper rifle and rocket launcher. What this system does is make player power more predictable, but it also allows Supers, in a number of ways, to shine even brighter in the game."

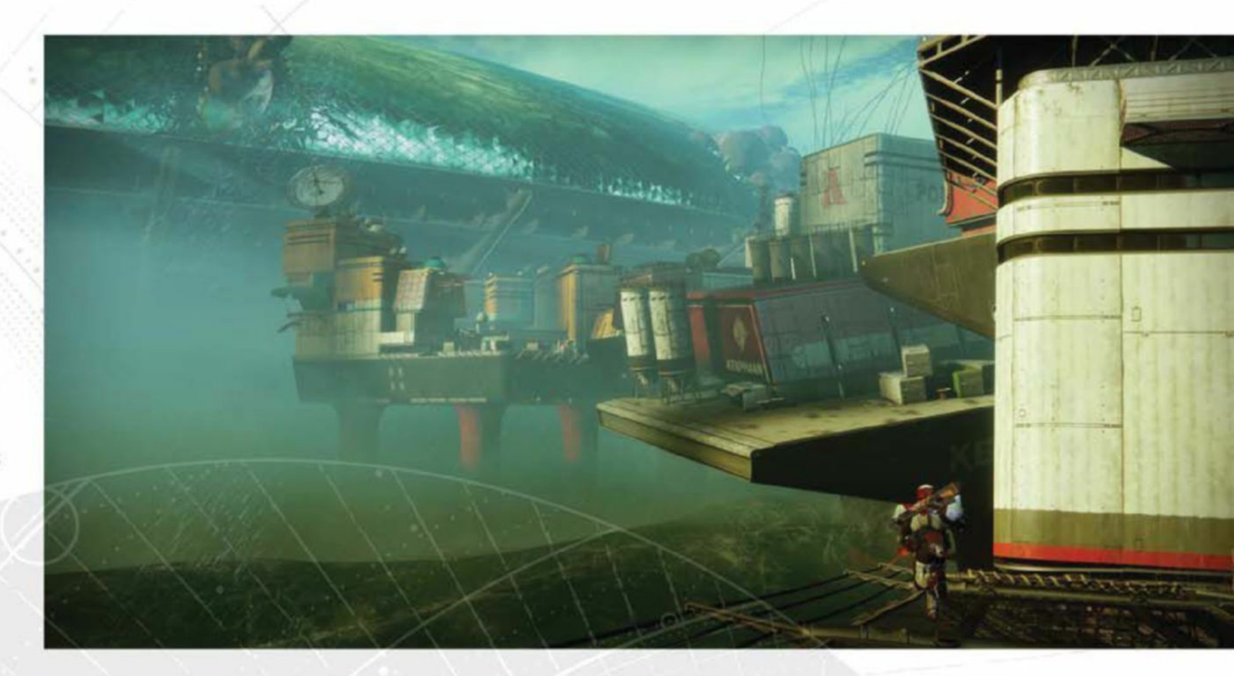
Our visit to Bungie coincides with the launch of *Destiny 2*'s beta, and while our visions of a workforce running manically around a studio on fire fail to come to pass, the game's first time in the wild adds a complicating element to this story. Normally, we play, and Bungie talks. Yet while we are at the studio, millions of people around the world are also playing the game; forming opinions on it, discussing it and, before long, complaining about it to high heaven. Smith quickly took to Twitter to assure the *Destiny* community that the beta was based on a months-old build of the game that had undergone extensive tuning since, but that wasn't enough.

The new weapon system was one bone of contention. Another was the length of ability cooldowns, the timers which dictate when you get to use the thrilling space magic that is as fundamental to *Destiny*'s enduring appeal as its wonderful, over-the-top arsenal, or the unending thirst for loot the game fosters in its most committed players.

So, yes, relax: base cooldowns are lower in the final game than they were in the beta. Yet there is a wider, structural change at play here, one born of a very different philosophy to that which drove the first game's design. There, cooldowns were mostly reduced by stats that randomly rolled on pieces of armour. They were passive, bestowed upon you automatically by the things you wore. Here, they are active; if you want your next grenade more quickly, you're going to have to work for it.

Take, for example, our beloved Warlock. A perk in the Dawnblade subclass lets us speed up the recharge rate of our grenade with airborne kills; an exotic chestpiece, acquired during the campaign when our character's level is still in single figures, makes us hover in place when we aim down our gunsights in the air. Dispatch four or five enemies while airborne and our grenade is ready again. Doing so is a risk, of course – there is no cover in the sky, so we are a static target in the line of sight ▶





RIGHT Titan's New Pacific Arcology is a mass of vessels and shipping containers, buffeted by enormous waves. BELOW The Warlock's Nova Bomb super has been heavily tweaked, and now tracks foes in the Crucible for what feels like an age

> "PLAYERS CAN CUSTOMISE THEMSELVES MORE – BUT DOING SO WILL INVOLVE A TRADE-OFF"

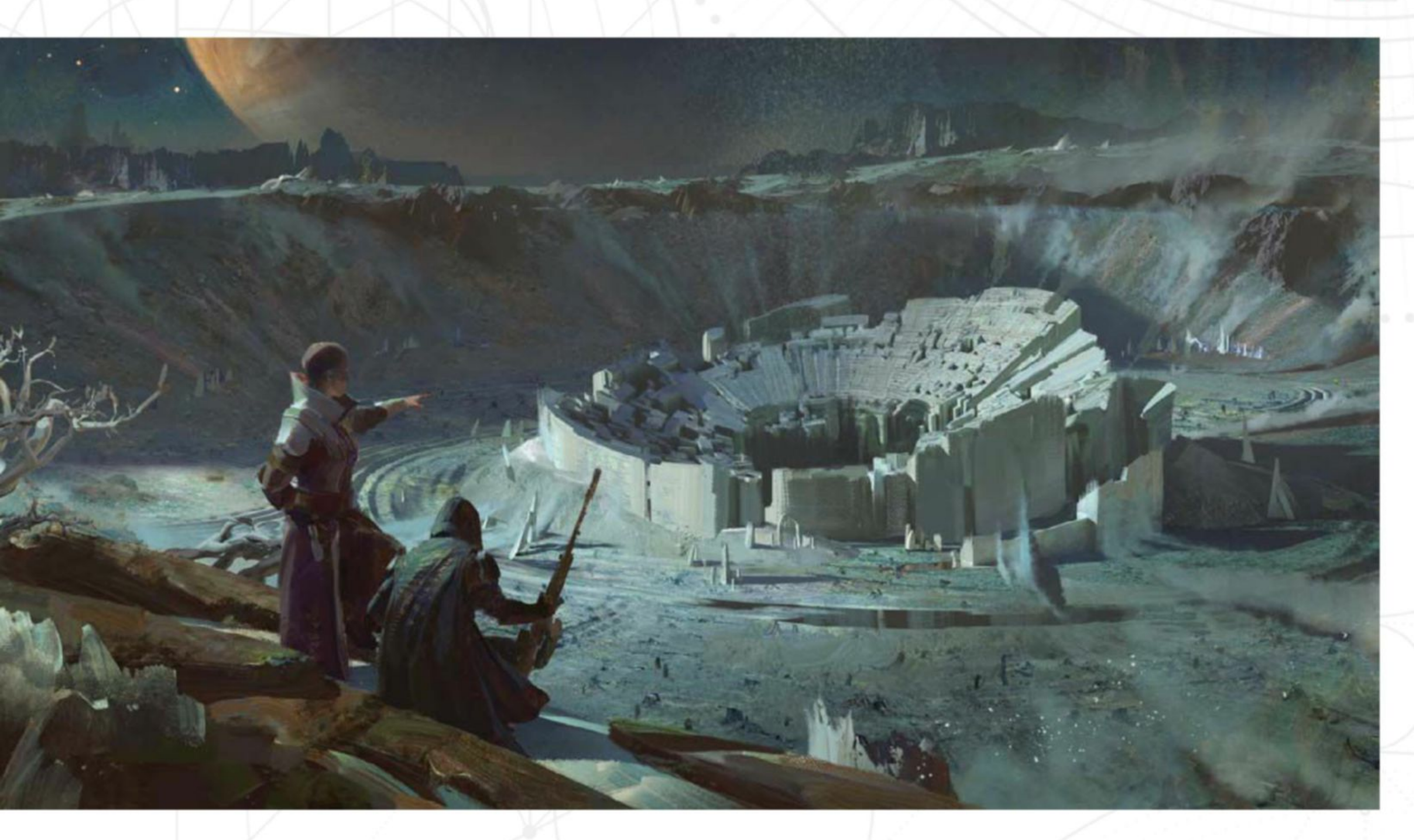
of every enemy on the battlefield. But it's a neat summation of the way Bungie is treating abilities in *Destiny 2*: acquiring them involves more input from the player than before, but the rewards for using them have been significantly increased. Grenades now hit like magical, elementally powered trucks, and are no longer solely used for clearing out low-level adds. Chuck one at a boss, and the effect is dramatic.

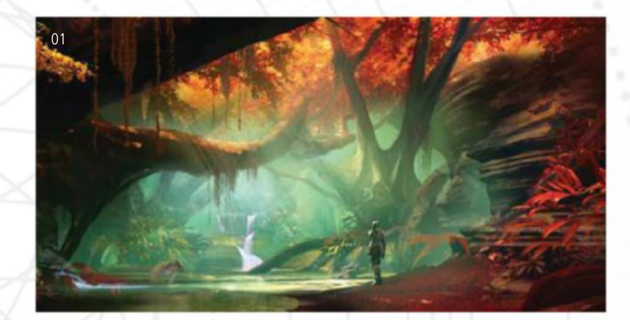
Smith gives us another Warlock example: the Devour state, triggered either by scoring a kill with your melee ability, or by 'consuming' a grenade by holding, instead of tapping, the throw button. When Devour is active, kills restore your health, and also accelerate your grenade cooldown. Charge it up quickly enough, and you can stay in the Devour state for as long as there are enemies around for you to kill, your health constantly topping up, your grenades recharging in seconds. It sounds a good deal better than crossing your fingers and hoping for the perfect piece of gear from a random number generator, then letting the stats do all the work. While Smith is explaining this to us, people on the internet are complaining because their gloves no longer come with numbers on.

"The thinking behind this is to make ability recharge part of the gameplay loop," Smith says. "We want to present opportunity and choice that means players can customise themselves more – but doing so will also involve a trade-off, and making difficult decisions. That's been our approach: how do these different elements conspire to create interesting combinations that lead to strengths and weaknesses in each character?"

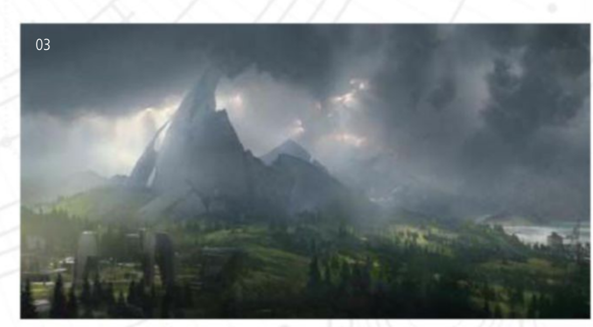
Online, the *Destiny* community has focused on the apparent weaknesses. Players of the Hunter class are especially miserable, believing the character presented to them in the beta to be a shadow of its former self, lacking utility and a clear role within a team. Smith points out that one subclass path lets Hunters create up to eight Super orbs for their allies using their Golden Gun – enough, when picked up, to fill every team member's entire Super bar from scratch. But there's more. Smith has asked us not to spoil it, and for once we've agreed. Suffice it to say that everything is going to be fine.

Levels have a much greater sense of scale now, and if there is instancing between areas, it's certainly nowhere near as obvious as it was in *Destiny*













05

06

07

08

01 **Nessus looks like *Destiny*'s Venus through the lens of *No Man's Sky*.** 02 **Earth's European Dead Zone is the largest level Bungie has built.** 03 **A shard of the Traveler, which falls to Earth during the assault.** 04 **Hunter players may be unhappy, but they still get all the best clothes.** 05 **Hand cannons feel a little harder to use than they did in *Destiny*.** 06 **A ship exclusive to the PS4 version.** 07 **An ominous Red Legion destroyer.** 08 **Dominus Ghaul dresses in white – he believes his intentions are noble**





This is a much better-looking game than its predecessor, with weather and lighting effects greatly improved and Super activation now met with a glorious shower of particles



W E   E X P E R I E N C E   S O M E T H I N G   W E ' V E   N E V E R   B E F O R E   K N O W N   I N   D E S T I N Y :   A   F E A R   O F   H E I G H T S

There's plenty more we can't talk about – one day, you must ask us about the magician – but we are, thankfully, clear to tell you a little about the campaign. The *Destiny* community's fuss over the finer mechanical details is entirely understandable given the hundreds and thousands of hours they have sunk into the series to date. In the endgame, victories are often won in the margins, by the hair's breadth of a tiny tweak in stats. But the community's vast experience is also a problem. Smith regrets that players have analysed the *Destiny 2* beta as if it were "a balancing patch for *Destiny*, rather than a new game". Lest we forget, this is a sequel, one designed not only to appeal to hardened existing players, but also to lure in new ones, and those who walked away from the muddled, beautiful mess of a game that launched back in 2014. That is an endeavour that begins by fixing what was, for many, the worst thing about the first incarnation of *Destiny*: its story, if you can call it that.

So it gives us great pleasure to report that – heavens above – *Destiny 2*'s story is not only entertaining, but also *makes actual sense*, from beginning to end. The scene is quickly set: the Red Legion, an elite faction of the hulking Cabal race, has designs on the Traveler, the looming planet-like sphere that gives *Destiny*'s Guardians their powers and the ability to regenerate after death. Under the leadership of Dominus Ghaul, the Legion assaults the Tower, the last remaining city on Earth, and leaves it in tatters. The enemy encases the Traveler in a cage, preventing it from dispensing Light, stripping the Guardians of their abilities and sending them running scared to nearby planets and moons. Ghaul, it transpires, intends to drain the Traveler of its power, and use it to his own nefarious ends.

Those intentions, in a remarkable change from the frequently baffling *Destiny* campaign, are clearly explained in an early cutscene that shows a conversation between Ghaul and his consul, a lifelong friend. Occasionally, characters in the original *Destiny* story had backstories and motivations. Oryx, the final boss in *The Taken King*'s raid, sought revenge for the Guardians' murder of Crota, his son, in an earlier expansion. But any nuance was either squirrelled away in the Grimoire (a collection of lore-dispensing cards unlocked by playing the game and accessible only on Bungie's website) or simply never explained. Yet within an hour of sitting down with *Destiny 2* you understand what the bad guys are doing, and why. They seek to build an empire, to reshape society; to lead it, certainly, but to do so in a way they feel will be better than the status quo. You might actually see their point, even if they've kidnapped one of your most valued allies.

"That was the key thing for Ghaul: to have a villain that had motivations," Smith says. "Oryx had them too, and it was cool to base it on the player's action in some way. But Ghaul's aren't based on what players have done. It's what he wants; his own desires."

Thus the scene is set: while Ghaul works to harvest the Traveler's energy, you must first recover your powers, then reassemble your troops from their interplanetary hiatus, before working out how to coordinate an assault on the elite members of a faction of enemies who, as one of *Destiny*'s few memorable lines of dialogue once explained, "blow up planets just for getting in their way."

And so, once the Red Legion has destroyed the Tower, you awake in the European Dead Zone – the largest area Bungie has ever built – with no weapons or powers, and walk slowly, with a stagger. You must, if only for a while, play a very different game. A fallen tree provides an essential bridge across a gap that, normally, you'd sail over without a second thought. A new mantle animation, which we'd previously thought had been solely designed to ensure you no longer miss a ledge that's 30 feet off the ground during a firefight, proves vital for getting over a low wall. And along a mountain trail, as we follow a tight path towards our objective, we experience something we've never before known in *Destiny*: a fear of heights.

It doesn't last long, of course. Soon after, you happen across a farm; in time, this will become *Destiny 2*'s first social space, teeming with fellow Guardians, and vendors dispensing quests and wares. But for now, it's just a small settlement populated by other humans, some of whom are warriors who've lived there all their lives and never been blessed by the Traveler's Light. Among them is Suraya Hawthorne, a handy sniper with a fine line in withering sarcasm. She alerts you to a nearby shard of Light that fell from the Traveler during the attack; others have noticed as well, of course, but once you've seen them off you're soon running around with a new set of powers, able to throw caution to the wind safe in the knowledge that, if it all goes wrong, you'll simply be brought back to life. "We're back," your Ghost companion swoons. "Let's spread the love."

From there, it's a matter of getting the band back together, of the Farm slowly repopulating with old friends as you flit from Earth to Titan, Io and Nessus, rescuing the disparate members of the Vanguard from the far-flung corners of the solar system. It is a timeworn method of storytelling, sure. At times it feels a little safe. But we'll take safe over nothing any day of the week.

And while we won't spoil too many specifics, the journey itself is a great improvement on the original game. There is a far bigger sense of scale; vast open ▶



K E E P E R   O F   T H E   P A C K

Raids offer the steepest challenge, and greatest rewards, in all of *Destiny*. Yet by the time 2015's *The Taken King* was in the wild, only 27 per cent of all players had completed one. Team requirements are demanding: you need six players, they need to talk, and must be able to survive some stressful situations without falling out. That, evidently, was too much for some, but it's something Bungie is seeking to address with a new system, Guided Games. Essentially an in-game LFG system that lets willing players find like-minded clans to take on challenging content with – and vice versa – it's the brainchild of M E Chung, *Destiny 2*'s social lead. After stints working on *Tomb Raider*, *Bioshock* and *Halo*, she finally found what she was looking for at Bungie: a chance to work on a game that put social interaction at its core.

The system comes from Chung's time as a competitive *Counter-Strike* player, and later as part of server communities in games such as *Ultima Online* and *Star Wars Galaxies*. "Social is not a thing people seek," she says. "You don't see people on Facebook writing, like, 'I'm feeling really social today'. But to me it's about, how can I help people feel like their life was worth it, and valuable? For me it's always been about the time you spend with the people you love. Other people are going to be better doctors than me; others are going to be better scientists. If there's anything I can do to help, it's going to be building these experiences so that people have these longterm memories with the people they enjoy playing with." There will be other benefits for clan members: if you don't finish the Nightfall one week but a clanmate does, you'll get a reward package in their honour. Alternatively, if you're like the guy that ragequit our raid group and never came back, at least you'll be able to find a new team a little more quickly.

DESTINY 2'S STORY IS NOT ONLY ENTERTAINING, BUT ALSO MAKES ACTUAL SENSE, BEGINNING TO END



In addition to vendors and other Guardians, The Farm has chickens milling around and, in a nod to *Destiny's* Tower, a fully functional game of football, scoreboards and all



areas with warring factions doing battle beneath majestic Bungie skyboxes are a recurring theme, and it's impossible not to think of the series with which the studio made its name – especially when you're put at the controls of a vehicle or three. Smith downplays the *Halo* comparison ("I look at the team, their talents and what they're excited about… it's a throwback in some ways") but it's inescapable during play, and all the better for it. There has always been a note of *Halo* in *Destiny*, and particularly in its enemy designs: Dregs are Grunts, Captains are Elites and so on; every flavour of AI combatant has its way of fighting and a unique, identifiable silhouette. But the link is an overt one now, this complex, convoluted loot grind of a game finally given the narrative component its mechanics and systems have always deserved, drawing on the studio's experience making the greatest sci-fi FPS of its generation as it seeks to finally do so again.

It gives us great optimism for the game at large, too. Boss fights are no longer attritional checks of your damage output and endurance, but tests of skill; the excellent, shape-shifting final boss neither relentlessly shells you nor surrounds you with swarms of minions, but does just enough to ensure you're constantly moving, always thinking, forever under threat. His health bar goes down quickly once you can land shots on him, but the real battle is creating the opportunity to do so, finding gaps between his attacks and his backup troops. *Destiny*'s bosses have previously been about phases; not just in terms of the boss' attacks, but also the way they dictate your actions. If the campaign is any guide, *Destiny 2* shifts the focus away from the designer and onto the player, letting you set the terms of engagement, the flow of a fight now a question of skill and good decision making.

Aside from some occasional, gentle level-gating forcing us off the critical path, we rather stomp our way straight through the campaign – after two days at the studio, we have a plane to catch. But we rather wish we hadn't. One of the most fundamental additions to *Destiny 2* is an on-planet map that shows you exactly where to go to trigger its many activities. A squeeze of the left trigger here brings up the Milestones menu, which makes clear the next step in the story, as well as highlighting other activities that can be completed for rewards. That it is even required should tell you everything about how many distractions are to be found elsewhere.

Public events – spontaneous in-world co-op challenges that previously had to be happened upon by accident, or found using a thirdparty app – are now marked on the map (some can be called in manually by picking up a flag that refills your Super

"I'M SO EXCITED FOR PEOPLE TO PLAY IT. I'LL TAKE MY USUAL FEW DAYS OFF AND JUST GO NUTS"



SIGN OF FOUR

While our visit naturally focuses on *Destiny 2*'s PVE component – and on putting worried minds at rest – the Crucible PVP has been the subject of an even more substantial overhaul, with the player count reduced from 6v6 to 4v4 across the board. The UI has been redesigned, too, to show each combatant's chosen subclass and how close they are to having their Super available, while Power ammo spawns can only be picked up by one player, rather than the whole team. The change has mostly been aimed at making a competitive game that is easier to understand, learn from and improve at than the often chaotic 12-player action of the first game.

That's fair enough, but it causes a mathematical problem, and brings with it a certain sadness. Aside from the Doubles PVP mode, all activities in *Destiny 1* were playable in teams of either three or six. Finish a six-man raid, and you could split into two three-man fireteams and chase other PVE objectives, or head into Crucible with a full six. That's no longer going to be the case. "We knew that by changing the team size, some of these things wouldn't work as well as in *Destiny 1*," says lead Crucible designer Lars Bakken. "But even though the ease of moving between activities was great, the core problems that were festering at the centre of the Crucible were unfixable. There was no way to attack them." Now, should you decide to move from raid to PVP, two players will be left hanging; for all that Smith and the team want players to have more conversations in *Destiny 2*, that doesn't sound like a particularly fun one to have.

meter). Elsewhere, Adventures are lengthy, fully voiced side missions, thick with story, that span multiple sections and yield valuable rewards. Lost Sectors are signalled by in-world graffiti, nudging you towards some innocuous corner of the level that leads to a battle against a miniboss guarding a crate full of loot, encouraging exploration in a manner the first *Destiny* never managed. There are meaty World Quests, too, that further flesh out the story. Patrols and Strikes – the only PVE activities available in *Destiny 1* outside of story missions – don't unlock until the final third of the campaign, and until the notification popped up we hadn't even noticed their absence. In total there are over 80 missions and activities in *Destiny 2*, and each is substantial – in length, challenge, story and reward. As we leave, reluctantly, for our flight, we take one final look at the map of one of *Destiny 2*'s four worlds. It is absolutely teeming with things left undone.

That doesn't sound like *Destiny*. And indeed, it left Bungie with a difficult, and sorely unfamiliar, challenge: one that Smith didn't notice until he spent a long holiday weekend playing the game for 60 hours on the studio's private test server. "We had more content than we had progression," he says. Executive producer **Mark Noseworthy** chimes in: "We turned all these knobs this one way and it turns out that, at hour 55, you fell off a cliff." It's been fixed, of course. But anyone who spent dozens of hours running and re-running the first game's paucity of content, night after night, for weeks on end, will agree: that is a beautiful problem for the makers of the new *Destiny* to have to solve.

While the true story of development of the first *Destiny* has never been fully told – and may never be – it's apparent that the game that shipped in September 2014 did not match up to either Bungie's intentions or its players' expectations. While the sequel's final product seems, on this inspection at least, to have crossed the line in much better shape, it's clear that development has once again taken a toll. "You can see it in the eyes of some of the [team] leads," Smith says. "You can see the light going out a little bit, the sparkle starting to fade."

When we visit, Bungie is a little over a fortnight away from shipping the launch version of *Destiny 2*. It's a brutal time: not just because it's the final push, but because the process involves a stream of difficult decisions. Faced with a sprawling bug list, the leadership team must decide whether an issue can be fixed in the time remaining, tweaked or simplified so that it works, or simply taken out – perhaps to be revisited later on, but possibly thrown away for good.

"It's bittersweet," Noseworthy says. "Those tough conversations about what's going to live or die; how we're going to solve some horrible problem – that's really draining and exhausting, and the hours as we close are hard. But then you sit down and play the game, and because you're changing less and less – you're fixing bugs, polishing things, getting that last mile of perfection on things – the game comes on leaps and bounds. And instead of month over month, it's day in, day out. Like, 'Holy shit, this is way better than it was two weeks ago.' It's really inspiring. I've worked on a mediocre game or two when you're like, 'We've just got to get this done, get it in the box and forget about it.' But we're trying to make something that's awesome – that we ourselves want to play."

Smith certainly does – 60 hours in a long weekend is no mean feat, after all – though you'd forgive him for being a bit sick of it by now: he's lost count of how many times he's levelled all three characters, how many times he's played through the

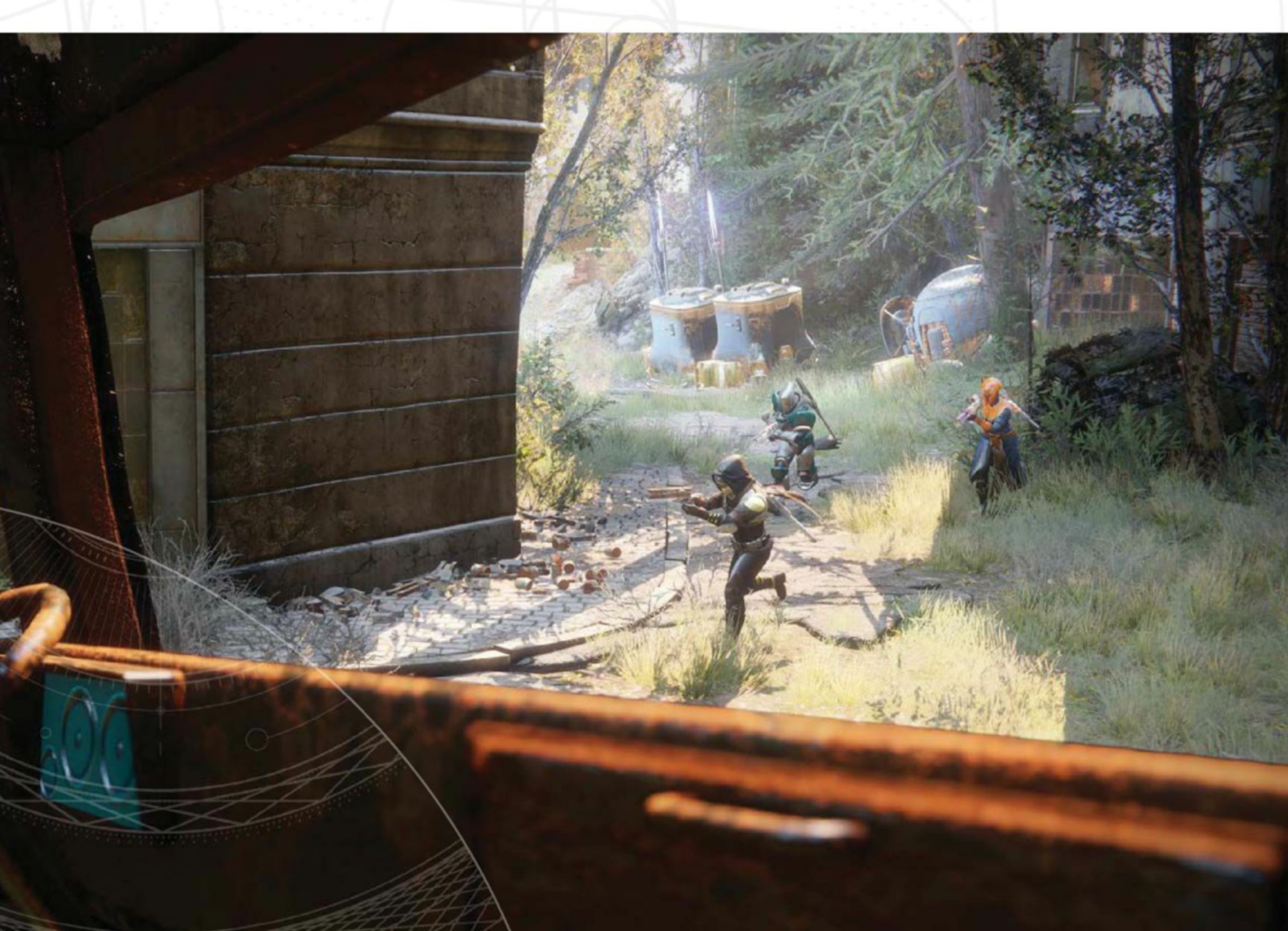


campaign. But he's looking forward to when, with the game finally in the wild, he can play through it a final three times, and know that it finally counts. "I'm so excited for people to play it. I'll be there on day one with them, and take my usual few days off when a game comes out and just go nuts. I love playing *Destiny*, and I love working on it. I get very excited when projects come out: that's what brings me joy, watching people react to what this incredible team has put together.

"This one's been challenging. The blood-letting is real for me on this one. But I'm almost done. I'm filing bugs like I'm chopping wood – which I enjoy. I used to do construction work, and it was about looking back at the day when you leave the job site. 'We built a boulder wall in that person's yard. Remember what it looked like this morning?' And the boulder wall this time, *Destiny 2*? It took years to build. But I'm about to drive away from the site, look back at it and say, 'That wall looks pretty OK.'

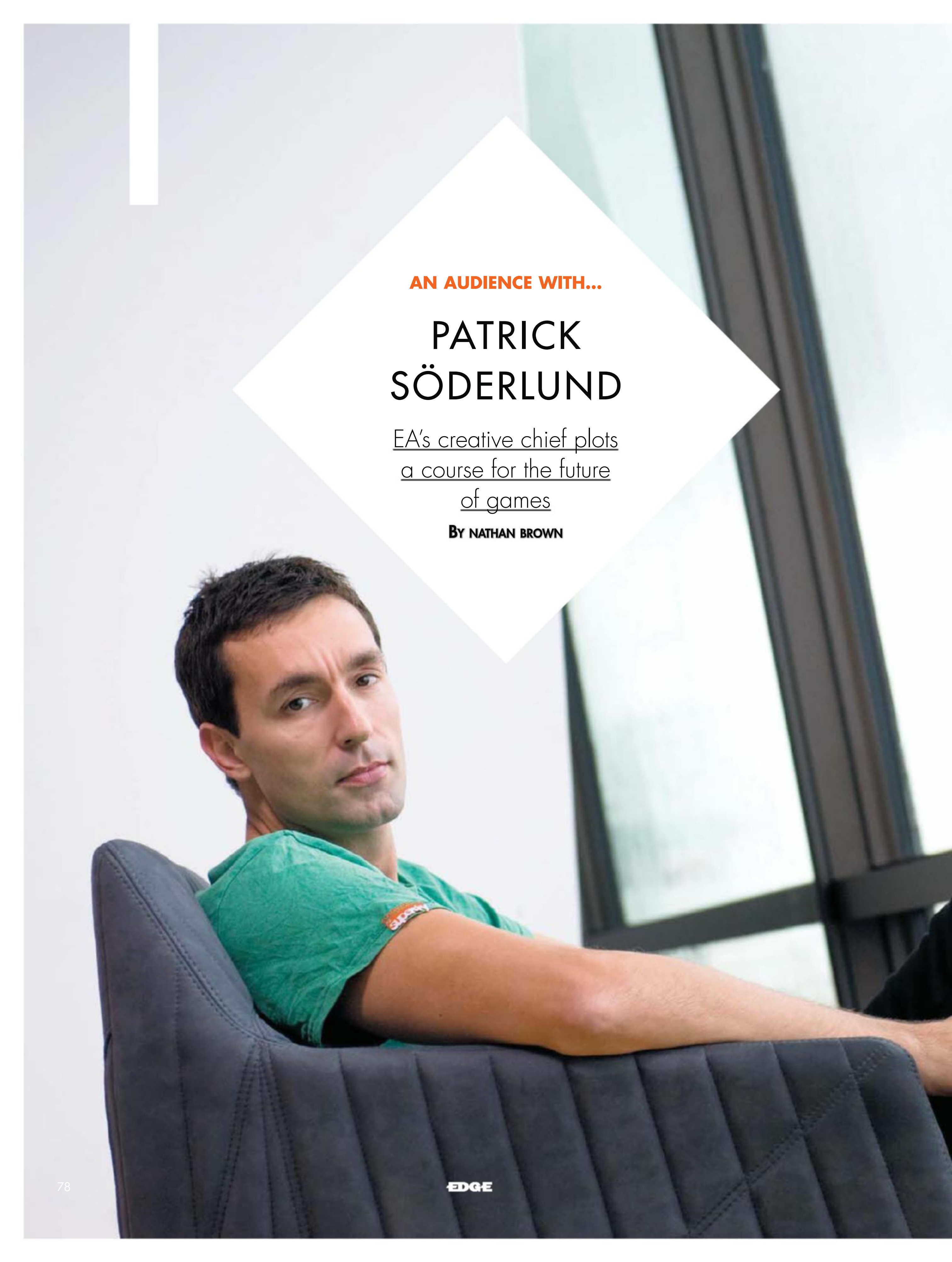
Concerns linger, of course. A two-day session, however intensive, is nothing compared to the thousand-plus hours we sunk into *Destiny* over its lifetime, and who knows what surprises – pleasant or otherwise – await in the endgame. We remain unconvinced by the new, 4v4 structure of the Crucible PVP mode. We don't know whether *Destiny 2*'s loot-dispensing random number generator will be a benefactor or a miser. And after launch there remains the question of how Bungie will meet the demands of a playerbase that burns through content far quicker than the studio can make it, and is always thirsty for more. Yet what we have seen suggests we have little to worry about. This is a bigger, vastly more coherent game than its predecessor, and one which may finally deliver on *Destiny*'s undeniable potential. We're just a few short weeks – and a few hundred hours after that – from finding out for sure. If it somehow doesn't take, we suppose there's always golf. ■

The apparent power of team-shooting in the beta was no error; indeed, Bakken says it's key to *Destiny 2*'s design. "Every subsystem in the Crucible is built around team cohesion," he says





AYSTATION



AN AUDIENCE WITH...

PATRICK SÖDERLUND

EA's creative chief plots a course for the future of games

BY NATHAN BROWN


LACOSTE

These days, Patrick Söderlund is EA's executive vice president of studios, making him the man responsible for all internal game development at one of the largest publishers in the industry. Appointed when Andrew Wilson took over as company CEO in 2013, Söderlund immediately set about a sweeping restructure of the way EA makes games; a process that has led to *FIFA* being made in DICE's Frostbite engine, for instance, and to *Star Wars Battlefront II* being developed by three studios in collaboration. Here, he discusses the challenges in keeping a global set of plates spinning, how to innovate in a company built on annual blockbusters, and where EA will sit in an industry dominated by virtual and augmented reality.

The second EA Play was a success for you. What did you learn from the first year that affected how you set up the second?
We learned a tonne, to be honest. We learned that the concept of letting players and influencers touch the games we have in development is a good thing. We learned that people were willing to come and see us, which was something we didn't know for sure. But we also learned that last year's venue wasn't right for us. We had some logistical problems that we dealt with this year, and I think we had more stations and more space. We obviously still had longer lines than I wanted; the intent is not for people to stay in line.

What's the answer to that problem?
I don't think it matters what we do. We could limit the amount of people that get to come in and have five times the amount of stations, but I'm not sure that's viable. But we're extremely happy. We feel like this year was a lot better than last year for us, and we're getting better feedback from the people that were there, as well.



Does knowing that you're doing a big summer event like that affect the way you make games at all? It must be challenging knowing you need to have X games playable, since you can't just give the public a hands-off demo like you can the press.
Not really – we've always had to prepare for E3 anyway. We've done it for almost 20 years, and this year was no different than any other – it's just that it happens to be a couple of days earlier. The push to get people hands-on does put a slightly different perspective on things; the software needs to be further advanced, because you can touch a lot of our games. That's both good and bad for development, but in general I find these types of events – and other events like Gamescom, or even internal review sessions – can serve as a good push for a team to get to where they need to be. A team that can articulate what they're building, that has a clear vision of what they're building – after that usually comes a good game. The teams that struggle are the ones that can't get to the vision. Once you know what you're building and can clearly articulate that, with a risk of sounding arrogant, it's not so hard to do it. It's figuring out what you're building that's the hard part.

"IN ORDER TO MOVE FORWARD, YOU HAVE TO CONTINUALLY QUESTION YOURSELF AND WHAT YOU ARE DOING"

And if a game goes down well at an event, it's a shot in the arm for a team as they head into the final months of development, right?
Yeah. It's hard for us to get this many eyeballs on a game. It's not about bug hunting – it's more systemic and gameplay feedback that we're looking for. These are the things that are working; OK, put those aside, great. Polish them. Then you'll find some things we assumed were going to work that are not working. And those are the things we have to go home and correct, which is what's good, I think.

Can you give a recent, specific example of that having happened after a show demo?
I think if you ask any team, whether it's *FIFA*, *Battlefront* or *Need For Speed*, if they didn't have a list of 50 things they want to fix coming out of EA Play, I'd be surprised. That's always the case. It could be anything from how a gun feels, to how the camera's positioned behind a character, to a transition – we were talking about death transitions [in *Battlefront II*] today, we have to fix that. You see these things that become jarring when you put them in the hands of players.

Your corporate EA bio says you like to challenge the status quo. How difficult is that to do when you work for a company that is, above all else, a hit factory?
It is, to be blunt. It's always been. But you can challenge the status quo in many ways. You have to do it in the games that we're building, whether that's a *FIFA* or a *Need For Speed* or something else. I believe that in order to move forward, you have to continually question yourself and what you are doing. Whether that's the right thing to do, or if you're just doing it because you're used to it, and it's a known, comfortable formula. If that's the case, you're probably not doing the right thing. ▶





CV

A former player for Sweden's national volleyball team, Söderlund's big break in games came with *Codename Eagle*, a military shooter made by Refraction Games, the studio he co-founded. DICE bought Refraction in 2000, and the *Battlefield* series was born; by the time EA acquired DICE four years later, Söderlund was CEO of the Stockholm studio. Prior to his current role overseeing all of EA's studios, he was EVP of the EA Games label, looking after studios such as DICE and Criterion. When he became CEO, Andrew Wilson asked Söderlund to look after EA Sports as well as his existing brief; instead, Söderlund proposed doing away with the EA Labels structure, instead uniting all studios and IP under a single banner, EA Studios.

At the same time, I'll be honest, the support that I've had, and I think we feel from the company… I think of the first guys to pitch *Battlefield 1*, a World War I game. They pitched it for many years, and I said no many, many times (laughs). But these guys were persistent, and kept coming back to it. There was a pitch meeting where they showed me a pitch of how to make a fun WWI game, but also one that was relevant to consumers. I'm in a job where I can make those calls, and I can take that decision. And I did. I'd be lying if I told you it was smooth sailing to get everyone behind that idea, but at some point people got behind it. Had we asked that team to build yet another modern shooter, I'm not sure we would have ended up with what I think is an 89 or 90-rated game that has sold over 20 million units. That team got some of their passion back, and the desire to build something truly astounding. That's how I think about it. You want to make sure a team has that passion, that they understand what's important.

And a lot of the time people don't really know what they want.

Until you show them. A lot of these decisions, at least for me, are made just by raw gut feeling. Are you seeing something that can touch you emotionally? Does it feel *right*? Then, fuck it, we'll go for it. You have to dare to take risks to be successful. I've always been that way, it's just how I'm wired. It doesn't come without its challenges, to be honest: you'll have tough conversations with people. They know what to expect when I go into a review with them, and then can sometimes be hard on them. It never stems from anything but wanting to push the boundaries, and for us to be seen as a company that makes the best games in the industry. That's the ambition and the aspiration, at least: I'm not saying that we're there yet. It's the only way I know how to be.

These are big, expensive bets. Like you said – 20 million copies of a $60 videogame. You have to go and sell it to the guys upstairs.

Sure, but the team had already done the sales pitch. Without that, the feeling would never have been there. My notion of WWI, before what they showed me, was, it rained a lot, it was grey, it was trench war and a lot of people died. There's nothing fun about that, and nothing fun to play with. So what they did was, they packaged it in a way to show, 'Here's how we could artistically and conceptually sell this; here's why World War 1 actually is interesting'. It was a true world war, it was fought around the globe. We had a technical evolution that we hadn't seen before. The war started on the back of a horse with a sword in 1914 – OK that's an exaggeration, but fast forward four years and we had tanks, bomber planes, even submarines started appearing. Add in some cool conceptual stuff, and there's an interest to that. We looked at the [market] research there, but my gut said, 'That research is not applicable because they don't know what *we* know'. That's how you have to do it, I think. I get this question a lot: 'You're responsible for a $5 billion business, how do you feel about that?' I don't think about it at all. If you start thinking about it as money, you're inherently going to start making bad decisions. You have to think about it as a number on some paper, and never be motivated or driven by money. Any company that is motivated by making money, I don't think is going to do anything in particular. And they're only going to get to a certain size.

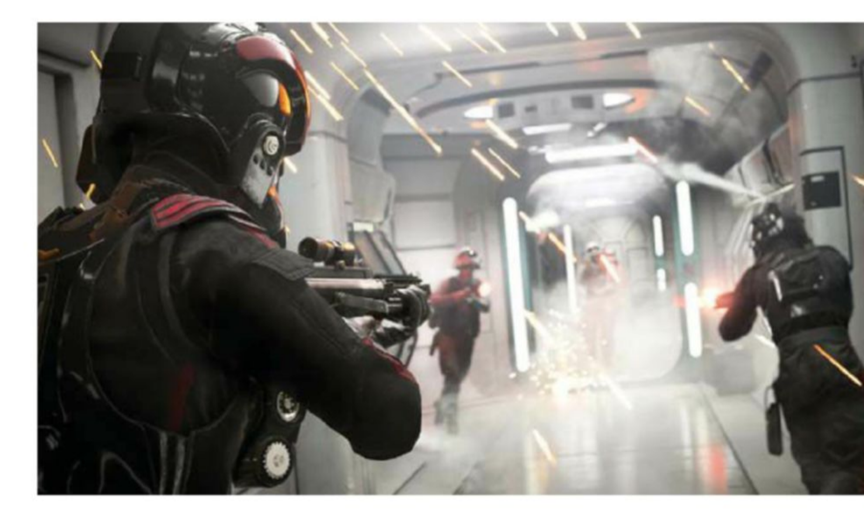
***Star Wars Battlefront II* is being made by several studios from across the globe. How have you managed the adjustment to this collaborative style of development?**

Honestly, we've always done it, just not officially. *Battlefront* is… I could come up with some bullshit answer, but it's very simple. We realised the first game didn't have enough stuff in it; we have this much time to build the second one; and we need to get three times the amount of content, at quality. How do we do that? We collaborate. We have roughly 6,000 developers at EA. When a team is done with a game and they go into pre-production on the next one, if we don't use all those people, and apply them to something else, it would be stupid. It's just not prudent, doesn't make any sense. So we've had Bioware work on [FIFA story mode] The Journey. We've had people from DICE helping out on *Anthem*. If you sit in the studio and all you do is make *FIFA* every day, that's great if you love soccer, but for you to be able to work on *Star Wars* for a couple of months? It's inspiring for a lot of people. It's not just about how to use resource; it's actually to help inspire people by doing other things, and it's working quite well. No, it doesn't come without its challenges – timezone issues, check-in problems, it does create overheads – and anyone who's been in development would know I'm bullshitting you if I say it's completely smooth sailing. That's not true. But at the same time it does give us an upper hand versus many other ways of working.

Your approach to indie development is intriguing. EA Originals is like a record label; very selective, very carefully curated. Why go that way?

There are so many indie games that come out every year; thousands of them. But if you're large like we are, and if you're game developers like we are, then when you start looking into that indie scene, you realise that a lot of them are struggling. It's hard for them to get funding.

"A LOT OF THESE DECISIONS, AT LEAST FOR ME, ARE GUT FEELING. DOES IT FEEL RIGHT? THEN, FUCK IT, WE'LL GO FOR IT"



Battlefront II **is being made by three EA studios: Criterion in the UK, Motive in Canada, and DICE in Sweden. Söderlund admits it has been a challenge**

There are some amazing concepts and ideas out there that never see the light of day. And most indie stories are not success stories. On the contrary: someone starts something and they may even end up in personal debt. There's a tragedy to it.

We said, 'OK, could we do something genuinely different? Almost suspiciously different, so people think it's too good to be true?' The programme was designed for us to get access to indie developers, for us to get a constant flow of game ideas and pitches, for us to fund it, help them with development, give them feedback and publish and market them – but then once we have recouped all the costs, give all the proceeds to developers, so we can give them stability and security.

There are three main reasons for us to do it. We believed that it would be good for EA's brand, as a company, and I have to think – and so does Andrew [Wilson], our CEO, and others – about how we build a brand. The second thing is for us to get in contact with new ideas and new developers: I'm certain that in one of these developers sits the next *GTA*, or *Battlefield*. I would rather be a person that worked with these people than not. And thirdly, it actually is a genuine, profound desire to kind of give back, a little bit. To understand where we came from as developers, and give something back. That may sound pretentious, and philanthropic, but it kind of isn't. Although it is (laughs).

EA seems quite wary of new technology that it isn't sure about. Two recent examples are Switch and VR: you've supported them, but at something of a distance. What is your current thinking on those two platforms? And what would it take for EA to fully commit to them?

Let's do Switch first, because I think that's the shorter answer. I've made people repeatedly, publicly aware that I'm a gigantic Nintendo fanboy. Nintendo was what got me into this industry in the first place. I take my Switch with me everywhere. What I will say is, we will appear on any platform where there are consumers, and players. We believe that we want to be a part of the Switch, and help Nintendo grow that installed base; that's why you'll see *FIFA*, which by the way is really good this year. It's a full-fledged *FIFA* game, for the first time to be honest, on a portable device. But at the same time we have to look at it from a resource standpoint and, at some point, the numbers become a factor. So for us it's about supporting the platform, building technology for the platform, testing it out with big things like *FIFA* – and maybe a couple of others, we'll see – and if they go well, I see no reason why we shouldn't have as much of our portfolio on that platform as possible. I hope we get there; that would be my personal ambition.

Do you think the industry has been blindsided by it a bit? It's doing a lot better than many people thought it would after Wii U.

A little. It's doing really well, which I love. But I'll be honest, when they first showed it to me years ago, I didn't get the concept, I was puzzled by it. But then I was like, it's Nintendo. They probably understand something that I don't (laughs). They usually do. I have a four-year-old son and it's like it's connected to him. He will use it as a portable machine, he will plug it into the TV, but more importantly he uses it like, 'Do you want to play with me?' Then he takes off the Joy-Cons and we play *Mario Kart* together. He's using it as intended, which just tells me that it's working right. I think it's a pretty special machine, because it's not just more of the same. I looked at it and thought, why would you play on *that* instead of *this*? But now it's crystal clear to me why. That's the Switch.

Fair enough. So, how about VR?

I would say that we are probably more aggressive than people understand, or think we are. We made the *Battlefront* VR experience last year with Criterion, and I think it's one of the best VR experiences out there. That meant that we had to get our engine to support VR, which it does now. The SEED [Search For Extraordinary ▶



Experiences Division] team has quite a lot of people working on this, but maybe on the outer rims of what it can be from an experience perspective in the long term. My problem with VR today, to be bluntly honest, is the machines and the hardware are too clunky. It's not good enough yet. There are cables everywhere, cameras; that doesn't work for me. If this is going to get to be mainstream the quality needs to be higher, it needs to be a completely untethered experience. And that's coming.

I'm also fed up with all these VR demos. I've seen 500 of them. I know, I get it, but I want to actually feel something, I want to touch something. I want to be *entertained*, instead of, 'Look, here's a cool demo of something.' It's coming, and there are some good examples out there. In my mind, there's no doubt that virtual reality, and augmented reality, will have a profound impact on our industry. They're too good not to. We will be there: we will be, I think, one of the pioneers of it, and push hard. But it's going to be a couple of years before we start seeing mainstream content on those devices.

Ubisoft has supported VR well, but they've been quite small projects. Is part of the problem that you're EA, and people have an expectation of the size or scope of the things you're going to make, whatever the sector?

As they should, and frankly, so do we. We just have to make sure that what we're building, and the level of investment we're putting against it, matches the potential output value. If we build the most amazing VR experience available today that only 200,000 people can experience, then I think that's a mistake. When we can reach the masses, and when there is hardware out there that can do what we think it needs to, then we will be there, and we'll be pioneering. For us it's about understanding the medium, what it means for us and what it means today, tomorrow and into the future, and preparing our technology base for it. We have 20 demos internally that are never going to see the light of day, but have served a purpose for us to create the new verbs that we need for making games in VR. That's more important for us at this point.

So once the hardware is up to scratch, where do you see VR going?

I said in my remarks on stage [at EA Play] that we will see more change in our industry in the next five years than we have in the past 45. For sure. If you're cynical you can look at the past 45 years and say, with maybe the exception of online multiplayer, there hasn't been that much innovation. If we are allowed to be cynical for a second, yes, visual fidelity has improved dramatically. Audio and all those things have become a lot better. But a game from 1982, *Super Mario Bros*, is still a viable game

"VIRTUAL AND AUGMENTED REALITY WILL HAVE A PROFOUND IMPACT ON OUR INDUSTRY. THEY'RE TOO GOOD NOT TO"

today. Fast forward 35 years into the future and, as a game maker, a game creator, I'm not sure how I feel about it. No disrespect toward *Mario* at all – that was the game that made me want to go into videogames – but I just believe that we have to challenge ourselves, and the status quo, quite a bit more, and start looking into overarching technologies that are having a significant impact on the outer world. AI, deep learning, neural networks, machine learning... the impact those are now having on our daily lives, anything from autonomous driving cars to medicine to diagnostics. Today, an artificial intelligence is about 100 times better at diagnosing breast cancer than a doctor is looking at X-rays. What will this mean for our industry?

AI in games in general is horrible. As designers, we always try and mask how poor the AI is by having these scripted moments; it's artificial intelligence in its simplest form. That's not OK. For us to have something that learns, that can understand what you're doing and can counter it, that can mimic a human player – that's going to be possible in a very short period of time. That's exciting to me. If you couple that with the capability for rendering... We have an initiative in SEED which is virtual humans. The first step is just to make it appear human, render it and make sure we get the right expressions and animations and feelings out of it. But the second layer is an interactive virtual human. That then becomes scary – but in a cool way, right? Those are the things that we are right now experimenting with. AR, VR, deep learning, machine learning, artificial intelligence, virtual humans... if you combine all these things, and on top of that you have an online element and a social layer, that is training people how to interact with each other. This is where the industry is going. Combine all these things into something and we will create something truly different from what we have today. That's what interests me. Does that all make sense?

It does, but we are now a bit scared.

I know, and so are we. But that's a cool thing, right? And we are actively working towards it. ■



FIFA 18 **cover star Cristiano Ronaldo has been meticulously mo-capped, and will feature in the story mode, The Journey**

S T R A N G

E S K I E S

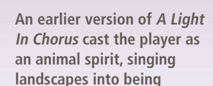
Meet the game developers trying to make sense of climate change – or imagine its aftermath

By Edwin Evans-Thirlwell



Fate Of The World **is modelled on the BBC-funded Flash game *Climate Challenge*, which itself arose from a pub conversation between Dr Myles Allen and sci-fi novelist Gobion Rowlands**





An earlier version of *A Light In Chorus* cast the player as an animal spirit, singing landscapes into being



Mirror Fish Media founder Matt Schell

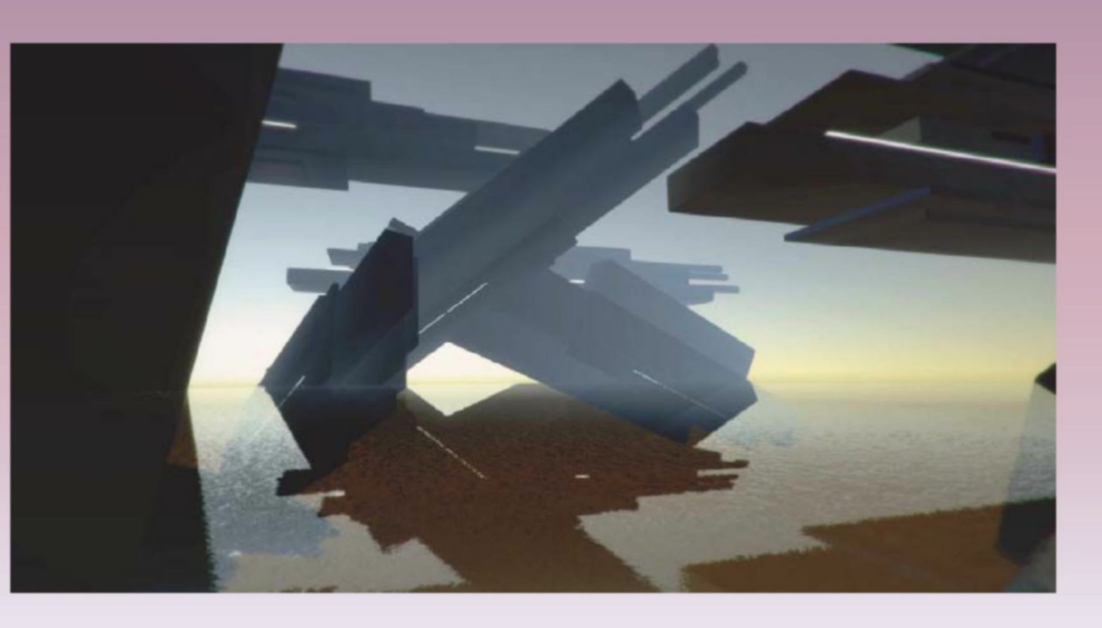
Climate change is everywhere, which is also to say that climate change is nowhere at all. Global warming is, for many, a spectral apocalypse: though broadly agreed upon, its causes are dispersed and ephemeral, smeared across individuals, nations and industries, from the meat in a Big Mac to the oil fields of the Persian Gulf. Its perceptible effects are diverse, indirect, relatively gradual, highly variable by region and above all, enduring: to buy a plastic bottle or Google a videogame is to add carbon dioxide to the sky that will shape Earth's ecology for centuries, a legacy that is impossible to grasp in the moment. The philosopher Timothy Morton styles climate change a "hyperobject": an entity so massively distributed in time and space as to be incomprehensible, yet also curiously, intimately meshed with the minutiae of our lives – the many systems of production and exchange we casually interact with, day to day. To think about climate change, he argues, is to be estranged from the objects and notions we take for granted, as we grow conscious of the unfolding catastrophe they pay into – a profound challenge to our sense of reality and ourselves.

It's here that artists, including game developers, might intervene to represent the immensity of the crisis, motivate action and unravel certain underlying assumptions. "Humans are terrible at responding to huge, slow-moving disasters," **Matt Schell**, of *Monarch Black* developer Mirror Fish Media, tells us. "And so I think videogames, among other art forms, have an opportunity to help players imagine a world devastated by climate change, and to maybe start thinking about it in a more productive way. It's possible also that games, as systems people play with, might have some opportunity to dramatise the struggle to maintain a liveable environment."

Broken Fence Games co-founder and *A Light In Chorus* designer **Eliott Johnson** agrees that there's a problem of imagination at stake. "Science is able to directly touch on these things, but maybe it comes down to that scale question. Somebody's got to be able to condense all that to make people understand it, because it's hard to understand it as a problem when all you've got is graphs. You need somebody to be able to turn it into a story."

Among the more direct and comprehensive videogame representations of climate change is Red Redemption's *Fate Of The World*, a turn-based management sim inspired by climate prediction models created by Professor Myles Allen at the University Of Oxford. Hiding its dense calculations behind an elegant system of cards that represent policies like solar energy research or free healthcare, the game tasks players with controlling temperature while preserving living standards in the face of wildfires, drought and mounting political instability. No small task, but as one of its creators, Soothsayer Games' director of digital development **Klaude Thomas**, concedes, *Fate Of The World* assumes

"I THINK VIDEOGAMES HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY TO HELP PLAYERS IMAGINE A WORLD DEVASTATED BY CLIMATE CHANGE"



Matt Schell hopes to create more work about climate change after *Monarch Black* – a vision of a flooded New York, created in collaboration with DJ Jace Clayton

that much of the hard work has already been done – unifying governments behind concrete temperature targets and an international body with the power to intervene. In reality, of course, states typically look to their own interests first.

"Let's say we establish a carbon budget – say, 600 or so gigatonnes of CO2e that we can 'safely' pour into the atmosphere," Thomas explains. "Well, who gets to emit that? Is it China, which has much lower emissions per capita than nearly any western-world nation? Or the USA, historically committed to a high-emissions trajectory? Clearly the costs and benefits of any choice have differing values depending on who you are. For Nuatambu Island it has already entailed losing half its inhabitable area. For India, [cutting emissions] could mean foregoing development. What price does one place on foregone development?" Thomas hopes to address this aspect of the struggle against climate change with Soothsayer's forthcoming *Fate Of The World Online*, which puts you at the helm of an individual country and asks you to build a global consensus. "You'll be scored on how well your nation does, but if the planet burns you're burning with it."

Fate Of The World's greatest success is how persuasively it models the volatility of both climate change and geopolitics. The cards themselves are easy to process, with icons indicating the overall effect they'll have on regional morale, but each feeds into a wealth of evolving variables that slowly becomes second nature to the player from one scenario to the next. One thing you'll quickly realise is that you'll need to boost ecological awareness in each region in order to render subsequent measures, such as a ban on shale oil extraction, palatable. Another, less heartening, realisation is that the globe's temperature will keep rising even if you reduce emissions to zero, thanks to systemic inertia. Thomas feels that players could still do with more guidance, however. "The heart of the problem is that great change is happening all the time, and player policies are applying deltas to those deltas – change on top of change. At the same time, we wanted cards to apply contextually. For example, the cap-and-trade policy needed to function differently in regions with 'leaky' regulatory regimes than regions with effective regulations. The card therefore needed to modify its effects based on the region. That interaction between region and card was complex, and explaining what was going on to players, doubly so! That is one of the critical things we want to fix in the new game."

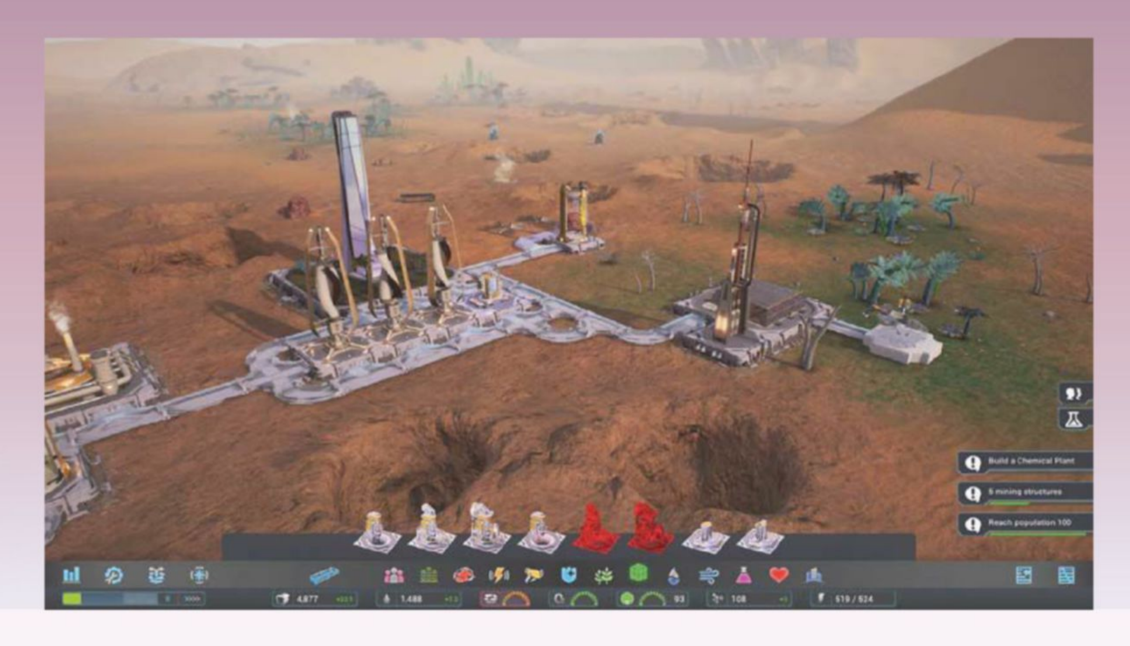
Another objective with the follow-up – one the series' top-down premise isn't, perhaps, equipped to fulfil – is to bring the consequences of climate change home to players at an emotional level. "The empathy barrier is immense," Thomas continues. "It is a trivial observation that humans feel deep sorrow when a friend or family member is harmed, but can hear news of thousands ▶



***A Light In Chorus* designer Eliott Johnson**



We Walk The Dirt Sea is a work of poetic compactness. It's possible to read the reactions of its characters as shock, obeisance, mourning or joy



Aven Colony's settlements are shaped by the availability of water, soil and minerals – there are no magic huts with food or building materials



Klaude Thomas, director, Soothsayer Games

dying far off with hardly a qualm. So what about when those people are dying in a possible but not certain future? To be clear, the heavy hammer of global warming will fall at the end of this century or later, in Africa and Asia. How might we have empathy for people who don't exist yet, in places we've never been? I feel like we did a good job of showing some of the possible decisions and outcomes, and why the problem is hard even if you can do whatever you want to fix it. But we didn't get in the empathy that I'd hoped. Bringing it down to nation level in *Fate Of The World Online* should improve this."

The game makes for an intriguing contrast to another strategy-management title that gives a central role to climate: Mothership Entertainment's glossy, engrossing sci-fi city builder *Aven Colony*. Set on a remote garden planet in the 26th century, the game is not explicitly about contemporary climate change: the majority of its mechanics and variables, like purging creeping infestations before they ruin your infrastructure, are reworkings of notions from other games in the city-building genre. "We specifically wanted to avoid referencing local ecological issues, as there are games that deal with those subjects already," Mothership founder **Paul Touzor** tells us. "*Aven Colony* is more about the broader perspective of human civilisation's place in the cosmos." His hope is that, like the *Civilization* series, the game will inspire players to consider present-day society as part of a broader optimistic narrative. "It's easy to 'look down' as we scale the cliff of human progress and see our society as the culmination of ten thousand years of history, but I'd rather we look up, and think of ourselves as the early precursors of a civilisation that will someday go to the stars."

If *Aven Colony* shies away from overt topicality, however, it is a game steeped in the science of planetary habitability that has a lot to say about our predicament today, albeit between the lines – a game that posits a fresh start on an unspoilt world, yet soon entangles itself in such highly contemporary questions as air pollution, soil quality and the pros and cons of renewable energy versus finite combustible fuels. One of its more original components is a punishing season mechanic, whereby crop and solar-power yields fall dramatically in winter: based on consultation with the astrobiologist Professor Abel Méndez, this serves as a recurring reminder that human expansionism is always an act of negotiation with one's habitat. One of the game's accidentally radical touches is that every colonist is a vegan by necessity, a piece of sci-fi speculation which echoes the argument that reducing consumption of meat would be one of the most effective ways of lowering emissions. Touzor insists that this is "definitely not driven by any sort of political angle on our part. None of us at Mothership is vegetarian."

If *Aven Colony* has some merit as a tacit ecological sandbox, however, it lacks *Fate Of The World*'s

CONSULT THE ORACLE

Can humanity survive climate change? Yes, says Soothsayer Games' Klaude Thomas, but at great cost. "We'll blow through +1.5 degrees within 15 years, and we're not stopping at +2 degrees unless we find a way to cool the Earth, on a massive scale. A few years ago the World Bank suggested +4 degrees was very possible by 2100. MIT's modelling included a worst case of +7 degrees by then and a best case of about +2 degrees. Anything over three degrees entails the destruction of a significant proportion of all species on Earth. However, we should probably qualify 'make it'. Do we think humanity in some form will survive? Yes, that seems likely. Do we believe that the course we're on right now will lead to enormous suffering and ecological losses? Also unfortunately, yes. Our feeling is that if we have not turned the corner by 2050 we will be facing some pretty bad cases."



Untame's wonderful *Mushroom 11* imagines a world after humanity. It casts you as a colony of fungal cells which moves by destroying parts of itself

"GO TOO FAR IN THE FUTURE, AND WHAT HUMANITY MIGHT TURN INTO STOPS BEING SOMETHING WE CAN RELATE TO"

awareness of how a society's ideological conscience might shift in response to an ambient pressure like the stresses of a new (or shifting) climate. In keeping with much English-language science fiction, it is essentially a game about replicating liberal capitalism on another world, in which success is often defined as the capacity to create processed goods for sale to other colonies, having dealt with the necessaries of subsistence. Its multiethnic colonists, visible trundling from dome to dome, are placid workers and consumers, though the developer hopes to add more complex political dynamics in future games or expansions. Mothership is, moreover, oddly wary of treating its far-flung extraterrestrial community as something alien, a stance that betrays a certain social conservatism. "Go too far in the future, and the arc of human progress disappears behind the horizon," Touzor says, "and what humanity might turn into stops being something we can relate to."

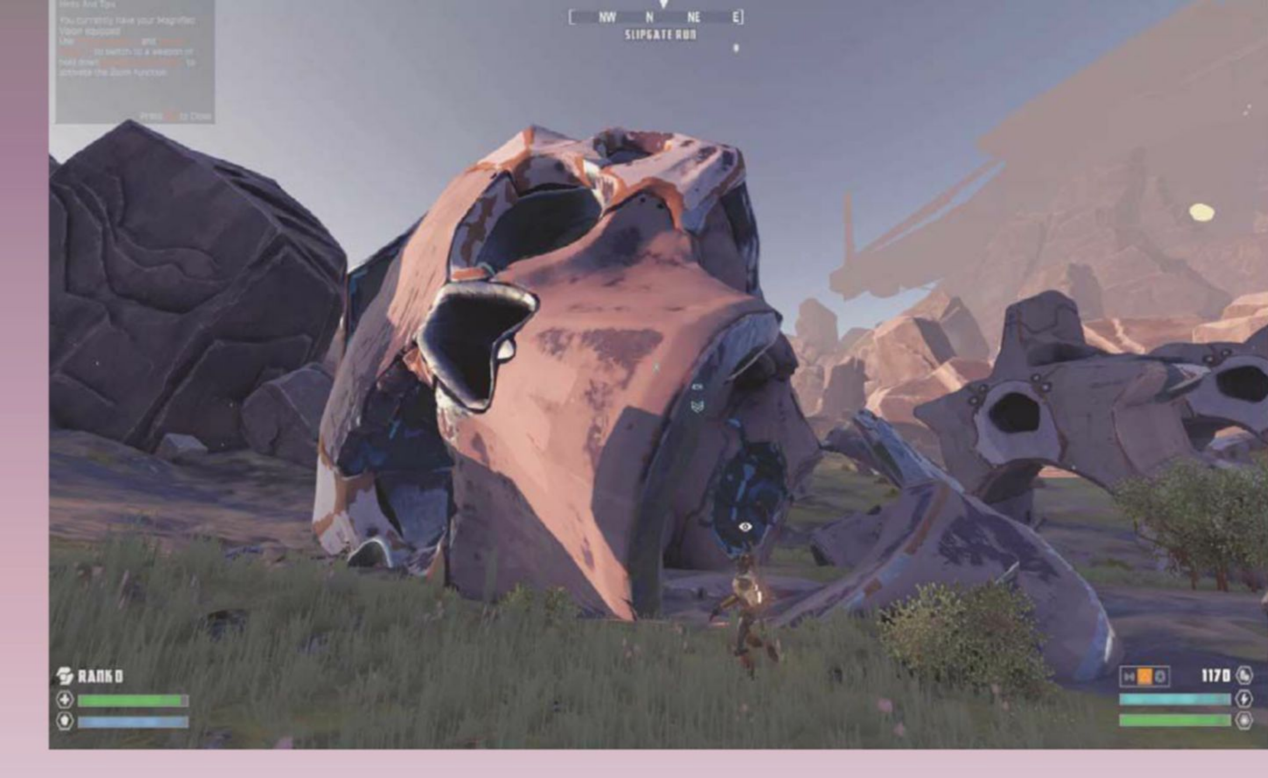
Other developers are more comfortable with the notion that a post-climate-change humanity might be hard to empathise with. New York-based designer **Ciara Burkett**'s deceptively fleeting *We Walk The Dirt Sea* is a game of unresolved meetings and alienated forms. It pitches you into a landscape of abstract yet vaguely humanoid entities, made up of dots, curving lines and broken 2D shapes, equal parts primitive cave painting and desktop icon. The fruits of Burkett's wayward attempts to master the art of drawing human anatomy, these figures are representations of a post-human society, a Rorschach of partly recognisable "bits and pieces held together by thought". "I believe that at some point in the future, humans won't be here any more – at least not in our current form," she tells us, "and I enjoyed thinking about what these new people would be like." Click on one of the figures and it will fall silently to its knees, a stunned reaction that parallels the player's own bewilderment at the encounter.

Eliott Johnson and Matthew Warshaw's *A Light In Chorus* is another Rorschach of sorts. Played in firstperson and constructed of shimmering particles, a visual motif derived from Lidar survey technology (whereby laser beams are bounced from objects to create a 3D image), it casts the player as an unfathomable alien intelligence far in the future, reconstructing a flooded Earth using audio materials from NASA's interstellar archive, the Golden Record. The game's latent ecoactivism lies with its decision to frame human civilisation as a peripheral object, in need of salvaging – an idea that arose from Johnson and Warshaw's readings of Arkady and Boris Strugatsky's 1971 novel Roadside Picnic, on which the cult open-world shooter *STALKER* is loosely based.

The book follows the efforts of human adventurers to recover objects from zones visited by extraterrestrials; potent artefacts that are, nonetheless, little more than ▶



Mothership Entertainment founder Paul Tozour



Though not explicitly about climate change, *The Signal From Tölva* is essentially an ongoing act of negotiation with a half-dead biosphere

MANY WOULD ARGUE, OF COURSE, THAT THE LAST THING AN EMISSIONS-PRONE EARTH NEEDS IS MORE VIDEOGAMES



Ciara Burkett, creator of *We Walk The Dirt Sea*

pieces of junk. "The Earth is just a fucking place where somebody dumped their trash, and all these artefacts that people love are just nothing to the aliens," Johnson says. "I think that's an interesting way of looking at stuff around ecology." As such he is designing many of the game's environments to be "very everyday… industrial", a tacit assertion not just of the importance of reclaiming such spaces, but also the possibility of an ecology beyond pastoral cliché – a habitat shaped by human activity that may survive humanity. "We frame nature as something separate from us, this Romantic idea of nature being a thing that's all green fields, but actually there's an ecology next to railway stations – it's that kind of space."

Matt Schell's *Monarch Black* transports the concept of a post-human habitat skyward. Its world is a bewitching, fecund abomination, generated from abstract, vegetal geometric shapes which grow in realtime as you play. "These represent nano-robots released into the air, designed to sequester atmospheric carbon into huge bricks and released as a last desperate, and failed, attempt to deal with the carbon-saturated air," Schell explains. "The humans are long dead and the nanobots replicate endlessly, futilely building carbon structures in the atmosphere." Players tour this hubristic extravaganza as a delicate drone butterfly, one of many robots that have evolved from security systems originally created to protect pipelines and refineries against ecological-sabotage movements during humanity's death throes. "All of this info is more theme or backstory than manifest in the game," Schell cautions. "I don't intend to spend a lot of time literally explaining this to players, I sort of hope people think, 'Hmm, this level is a drowned city,' and that registers with their subconsciousness more than some kind of finger-wagging didactic statement." He's keen, however, to work more with the concept of a post-climate-change world in future works, describing global warming as the "looming psychic background of our era".

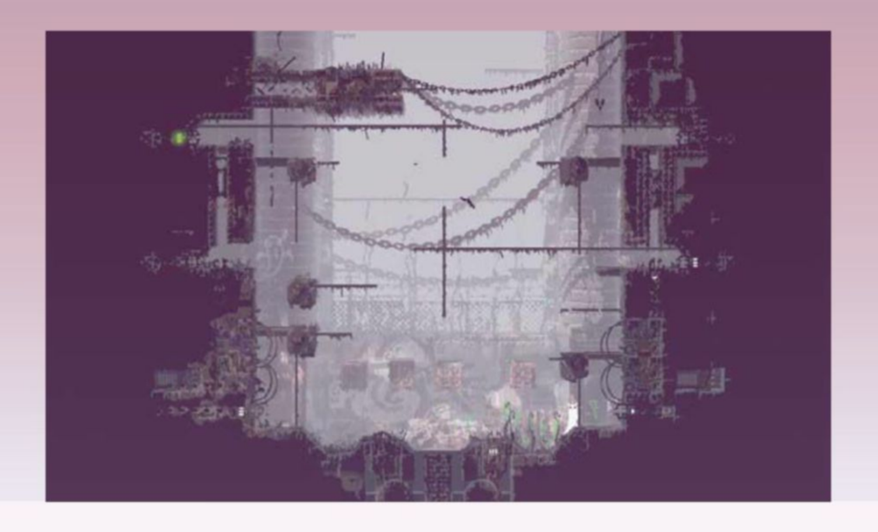
Perhaps the most significant recent game inspired by climate change is Videocult's *Rain World*, in which you play an anomalous slug-cat struggling to survive in a macabre, post-industrial ecosystem that is periodically devastated by rainstorms. A sumptuous work of pixel art, the game owes something to classic 2D platformers like Éric Chahi's *Another World*, but it is also a conscious investigation of climate change. "*Rain World* is hugely about those themes and I've been sad to see that not very many critics or reviewers seemed to engage with that aspect," observes **James Primate**, who is responsible for much of the game's narrative and world. Inspired by studio founder Joar Jakobsson's sense of isolation as an exchange student in South Korea, the game began life as the story of a rat in Manhattan sewers, able to survive within the architecture but ignorant of its purpose. This study in alienation – which compares

GREENER EPICS

While the creators of blockbuster games are wary of being seen to offer political commentary, a handful of studios have tackled the subject of climate change head-on. Ever the contradiction, the *Gears Of War* series has spent years modelling the decline of a human society hooked on a fossil fuel analogue, Imulsion. *Gears Of War 4* even made Sera's ravaged climate integral to its gunplay, with storms powerful enough to rip pieces of cover apart, though The Coalition was reluctant to expand on the implications of this when we spoke to the team in 2015 (the studio declined to be interviewed for this feature). Arkane's *Dishonored* games, meanwhile, are steeped in the putrescence of the Industrial Revolution, from the rats in the sewers to the whales suspended from slaughterhouse roofs. This is meshed with the game's array of story outcomes – to decide the fates of key characters in *Dishonored* is also to decide how diseased you want the landscape to be.



In *Gears Of War 4*, most humans live behind massive fortress walls, relying on a scrappy mixture of renewable power sources



***Rain World* has been marked down for its unpredictability, but this is perhaps the price one pays for a game that simulates a volatile weather system**

to how *A Light In Chorus* represents Earth as a benighted backwater – later evolved into an extraterrestrial fantasy.

"I think a big part of the fantasy sci-fi setting was conveying a 'stranger in a strange land' type of experience," Primate says. "We wanted the player to start from scratch, and have to explore and experiment in order to learn the language of a new land, and from there we could establish rules." Players are also, he suggests, "more willing to engage with some of these concepts when they are removed from the politics of the real world", a stance that echoes *Aven Colony*'s commitment to the broader stage of history, though there's little of Mothership's optimism to be unearthed in *Rain World*'s torrid, predator-stalked fastness. "We can all be shocked at the wanton ecological destruction of *Rain World*'s strange alien society, without getting wrapped up in the divisive minutiae of, 'Well, coal could employ this many people in my hometown' sort of thing."

Rain World is to some degree a linear journey, in which you travel from bolthole to bolthole between apocalyptic downpours, digging into the secrets of a vanished race whose traits are summarised as our own, damaging cultural foibles put through a funhouse mirror so we can see them for the grotesques that they are. On a more profound level, however, it is also a game about learning to live with an environment rather than merely overcoming it – its lengthy, colourful roster of predators spawned partly at random and thus difficult to 'game', their behaviours shaped by a variety of shifting factors. "The initial concept of the game was 100 per cent sandbox-terrarium ecosystem," Primate comments. "The evolution into the current form was, to a degree, a result of player interest, and also just the classic question of, 'How do we get players to actually see all of this stuff?'" It's still possible to play it that way, setting up shop in a relatively safe region where there's a bountiful supply of slug-cat victuals, such as bats or fruit.

Many would argue, of course, that the last thing an emissions-prone Earth needs is more videogames. The console business in particular has been censured by Greenpeace for its carbon footprint and use of non-renewable materials; recently, the charity also took manufacturers to task over the rising energy cost of downloadable software. But if the game industry is hardly eco-friendly, it offers an enormous platform for the dissemination of ecological narratives and values, from the slightly sinister sunny uplands of *Aven Colony* to the phantasmagorical microgames of Ciara Burkett. In the process, developers themselves become subject to a potent cocktail of aspiration and pessimism, hope and despair. "What I find interesting to explore about climate change is the way it touches our lives in ways we don't expect," Burkett summarises. "The meteor is outside my window, so to speak, but I don't notice until my rose garden starts to singe. This is part of the tragedy of humanity, but it doesn't mean the world ends with us." ■

THE MAKING OF...



THE MAKING OF: TITANFALL 2

Unstacking the building blocks of the most surprising FPS campaign in years

By Alex Wiltshire

Developer Respawn Entertainment
Publisher EA
Format PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin US
Release 2016

Steve Fukuda, game director of the *Titanfall* series, has worked on some of the biggest-hitting set-pieces in all games. Landing on Omaha Beach in *Medal Of Honor: Allied Assault*, reclaiming Stalingrad in *Call Of Duty 2*, a nuclear explosion in *Call Of Duty 4*, No Russian in *Modern Warfare 2*. "But, looking at *Titanfall*, we realised that we didn't have what I call the 'movie' of the game."

Whether Black Hawk Down or Saving Private Ryan, Fukuda's previous work was built on grand cinematic touchstones. *Titanfall* was instead founded on its multiplayer, which featured such novel ideas as AI mobs and the interplay between hyper-manoeuvrable pilots and hulking mechs. It was fast, tactical and dynamic, and also a model of the reason why multiplayer-heavy games, like the *Call Of Duty* series, feature expensive singleplayer campaigns. *Titanfall* lacked moments to breathlessly share around an office watercooler or be chewed over in op-eds.

This wasn't the only reason that, despite its strong sales, it quickly shed active players. But it was a significant one, and the first thing on Fukuda's mind when, in the autumn of 2014, he began to think about what shape a *Titanfall* sequel should take.

Building a singleplayer campaign might sound a straightforward task for Respawn's *Call Of Duty* veterans, but as Fukuda tells us, "One of the big challenges was also a certain degree of mental inertia of having been used to making the same kind of shooter campaign for many years. That was an internal obstacle to overcome. How do you make a shooter that's not *Call Of Duty*?"

The answer was in what amounted to a game jam, with members of the campaign development team being freed to experiment with design and technology. As a whole, the studio shucked away an internal expectation that the singleplayer campaign had to closely follow the rules of the multiplayer one, and began to tinker with ideas and build prototypes that might be stitched together and form the 'movie' of the game that Fukuda and co thought so essential.

Those first months of *Titanfall 2*'s development had few boundaries other than the object to use general *Titanfall* mechanics and its engine in interesting ways. "Some people did things with titans; some people did things with pilot mobility and wall-running; some people did things with puzzles," says Fukuda.



***Titanfall 2*'s controls are smooth and flexible, encompassing precision aiming, wall-running, slides and double jumps**

The prototypes the team were making were known internally as 'action blocks': discrete prototypes which would be eventually stitched together into a tightly controlled firework of a shooter campaign which throws idea after idea with almost Nintendo brevity; from time travel to transforming levels, leaping between spaceship troop carriers to titan assaults.

"WE'D FINALLY CRACKED WHAT THE SPIRIT OF THE SINGLEPLAYER WAS FROM A DESIGN STANDPOINT"

"You can imagine there was a lot of friendly competition in there," says senior game designer **Steven DeRose**. "I remember that after a set of action blocks that Mo [Mohammad Alavi] and Chad [Grenier] had made, I was sitting in an office with Mo and Chad comes in and says, 'No, it was a cool action block. I could've made it twice as good.' Then Mo said the same thing back to him about his."

Platforming was a big focus – all the better to explore the empowering and responsive Pilot mobility that granted the first game its immediate contrast with other shooters. Chad Grenier built a series of puzzles about moving cranes into place so the player could wall-run along the panels that hung below them. Sean Slayback built a set of action blocks that had Titans throwing the player between locations. "I don't think there was much finessing and iteration," says Fukuda. "You'd throw an idea out, then everyone says, 'Cool,' or, 'It could use work'. We wouldn't sit there noodling about it; we'd just move on to the next one."

But the intention was to discover good ideas and to look at them in concert in order to understand what shape the campaign would take. "Over a period of time we got to a point where we got a touchstone for singleplayer," says Fukuda. "We called it '211'. Two parts Pilot combat, one part Pilot mobility and puzzling, one part Titan combat. So '211' was this phrase we had to describe what a *Titanfall* singleplayer level would be and that was a big moment. We'd finally cracked what the spirit of singleplayer was from a design standpoint."

Then, the team started to figure out how to piece blocks together in a coherent way. Grenier's crane puzzle became a chunk of the Beacon level. Slayback's Pilot-throwing was chopped down, because the team found it difficult to implement into something interactive, into several cutscene sequences. But it was all very much founded on design, with the goal of building a game out of blocks of play.

As for the basis on which these components would be knitted together, the team was aiming, very explicitly, to make *Half-Life*. "That was actually said," Fukuda says. "The reason for that was primarily a matter of trying to create mystery, in the sense that players wouldn't be able to guess what was going to happen next. That would be a big driver of players staying with the campaign, and it was also a byproduct of the fact that we approached this very gameplay-first. Almost to the exclusion of story, to be honest."

Most *Titanfall 2* players would be hard-pressed to remember the details of its plot, which is mostly trying to keep up with making sense of the divergent ideas and set-pieces you face. Take, for example, the time travel that appears in *Titanfall 2*'s landmark level, Effect and Cause. For this section only, you are given the ability to instantaneously switch between time periods at an enemy facility; in the past it's filled with scientists and soldiers and is gleaming new, and in the present it lies in ruins, and Respawn takes every opportunity to play with it, posing puzzles and combat challenges and little narrative details that make you realise that you're actually causing all the destruction.

It originated in an action block made by designer Jake Keating, and it immediately

stood out to the team as something that should go into the game. Some members, in fact, felt that its mechanic should extend across the entire game. But rather than wring all they could from the mechanic, Keating and his group instead honed and cut it into the succinct and taut form it takes in the final thing. "Which is probably part of why people really like it," says lead programmer **John Haggerty**. "Stretching it out might have been a bad thing anyway."

And it was expensive to build, though not so much in terms of technology. "It's a funny level because people often ask us how we do that, switching back and forth between timelines," says Fukuda. "The answer is, well, we just made two buildings, one on top of the other, and teleport you up and down between them. It's super simple." But that meant that every location needed to be built twice, effectively doubling the workload.

Still, it was clearly exactly the kind of banner level that the team was looking for. "We wanted to showcase it to the point that we warped the story completely to accommodate it," Fukuda continues. "The whole ending with the spinning rings, it's all because we wanted to make it fit in the narrative. It was a big change."

Instead of the overall plot, what sticks is the relationship the story strikes between the player and BT-7274, the Titan you pilot over its course. That it'd be a buddy story was the one element that was set from the start, with the arc taking players from the role of the prototypical shooter grunt to, by its end, a light-footed and multi-skilled Pilot. The idea was that the progress would mirror the experience of players coming into *Titanfall 2* from playing *Call Of Duty*. "That was the in-joke about who you are," says Fukuda.

BT is primarily a construction of animation, since its voice only came in right at the end of the game's development. Even its name betrays BT's developmental roots: "We called the Titan the 'Buddy Titan'," says Haggerty. The rest of the studio hated the name; Fukuda only managed to keep it by refusing to change until it was clear it didn't present any problems, by which time everyone had acclimatised to it.

Animator Shawn Lee Wilson would normally work to voice performances, but without one to animate to he had to bounce ideas off Fukuda and construct BT as he went along, watching Akira Kurosawa films and tracing lines between Clint Eastwood and Sam Elliott cowboy roles to figure out its physical character, and expressing it entirely through its physical performance. Lee Wilson took over the studio's motion-capture room to act out BT's run, walk and gestures, embodying its great power and grace, steadily narrowing towards setting the strong and reassuring presence it has in the final game.

"It was important that the player felt reassured, because you're going to be this person stranded behind enemy lines, marooned with this strange robot," says Fukuda. "There's a sense that, as the new player to *Titanfall*, you needed someone you could trust, someone reliable and safe." In the first iterations of BT's script, however, it erred towards the bossy. They wanted to avoid Optimus Prime, and they also needed it to perform the role of the player's main objective-giver.

Part of the solution was to create conversations between player and mech, intended as a way of strengthening their bond with BT without resorting to cutscenes. But they raised some controversy in the studio: if they were making *Half-Life*, shouldn't they have a silent protagonist? When the script had BT asking if the player was OK after they'd fallen down a pit, Fukuda realised there was room for a response from the player character.

These moments of dialogue choice are a minor flourish for a game that's about wall-running across chasms and giant mechs hitting each other with swords. But they give a little space for self-expression, and even a gently progressive air among all the bullets, following the same path (if to a very different destination) as games like *Kentucky Route Zero*. Accidentally. "Actually, I played *Firewatch* long after the game shipped and I didn't know about it at the time, but, 'Oh, these guys did it already!'" Fukuda says.

Much of the flexibility with which the pieces of *Titanfall 2*'s campaign came together is a direct result of its engine, which allows designers a great deal of power to script their own levels. The engine is Source, which powers *Half-Life 2* and *Portal 2*, but was heavily modded to build the original *Titanfall*. During the making of the first game, Haggerty and his team had entirely broken the original Valve code that saves and loads level progress. Back then it wasn't necessary for a multiplayer game, but to reinstate it for the sequel's campaign was a huge hurdle.

The scripting system was entirely made by Respawn, too, and it enabled designers to construct even *Titanfall 2*'s most technical-seeming moments. Effect And Cause was not the work of programmers but of its designer, Jake Keating. Looking back at the way *Titanfall 2*'s campaign is constructed of hundreds of little blocks of play, it's clear that it's enabled by the fact its designers could quickly produce their own divergent takes on what mechs and Pilots can do.

There's one sequence during Into The Abyss, in which prefabricated chunks of buildings and ground construct themselves into the level around you for a single encounter, before it whisks you on to something completely new. It embodies the spirit of *Titanfall 2*'s campaign: it's a game about hyperactive movement and thundering power, built from one dazzling set-piece after another. ■

Q&A

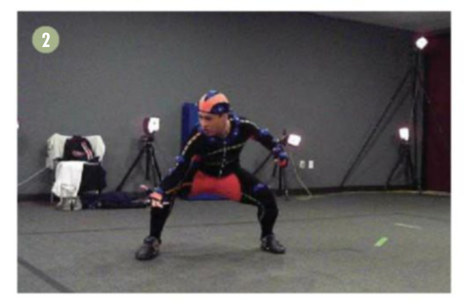
Steven DeRose
Senior game designer

What did you want to achieve in *Titanfall 2*'s multiplayer?
When asking players what they wanted, the answer most of the time was simply 'more stuff'. So we added things like a grapple and slide to reinforce movement and give more options. We were also trying to tackle issues that might be causing burnout, so that led to the changes to the Titans. In the first game you could freely customise your Titan but that led to people finding the best options, and that led to just two viable choices. So we broke up the Titans into different playstyles to reinforce the meta, and have a bit more depth.

Could you make many changes to the tactical relationship between Pilot and Titan?
We identified as four 'food groups' for combat: Pilot versus Pilot, Pilot versus Titan, Titan versus Pilot, and Titan versus Titan, and we're constantly looking at those relationships. In this game we were trying to give Pilots a support role for friendly Titans. So we made the battery system, where by either getting a boost or rodeoing an enemy Titan you can bring a battery back to a friendly Titan to heal them up, and that also gets you your Titan faster.

Bounty Hunt was the big new mode in *Titanfall 2*. How did it come about?
It came at the end of the project; we wanted to have another AI mode in the game, potentially one where the AI wasn't randomly scattered but in focal points to encourage combat to have more direction. And we wanted to increase the variety of AI combat, which shows up in the different AI and the boss Titans that periodically appear. The money and banks was an effort to add consequence to your death, and to give you a sense of security when you're a Titan.



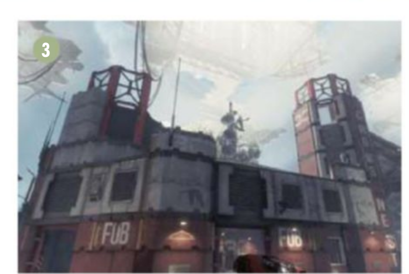


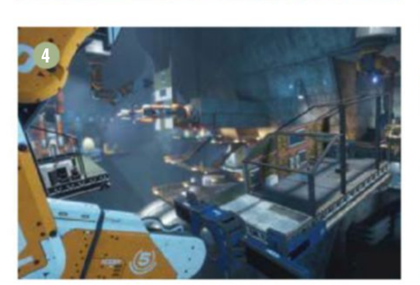




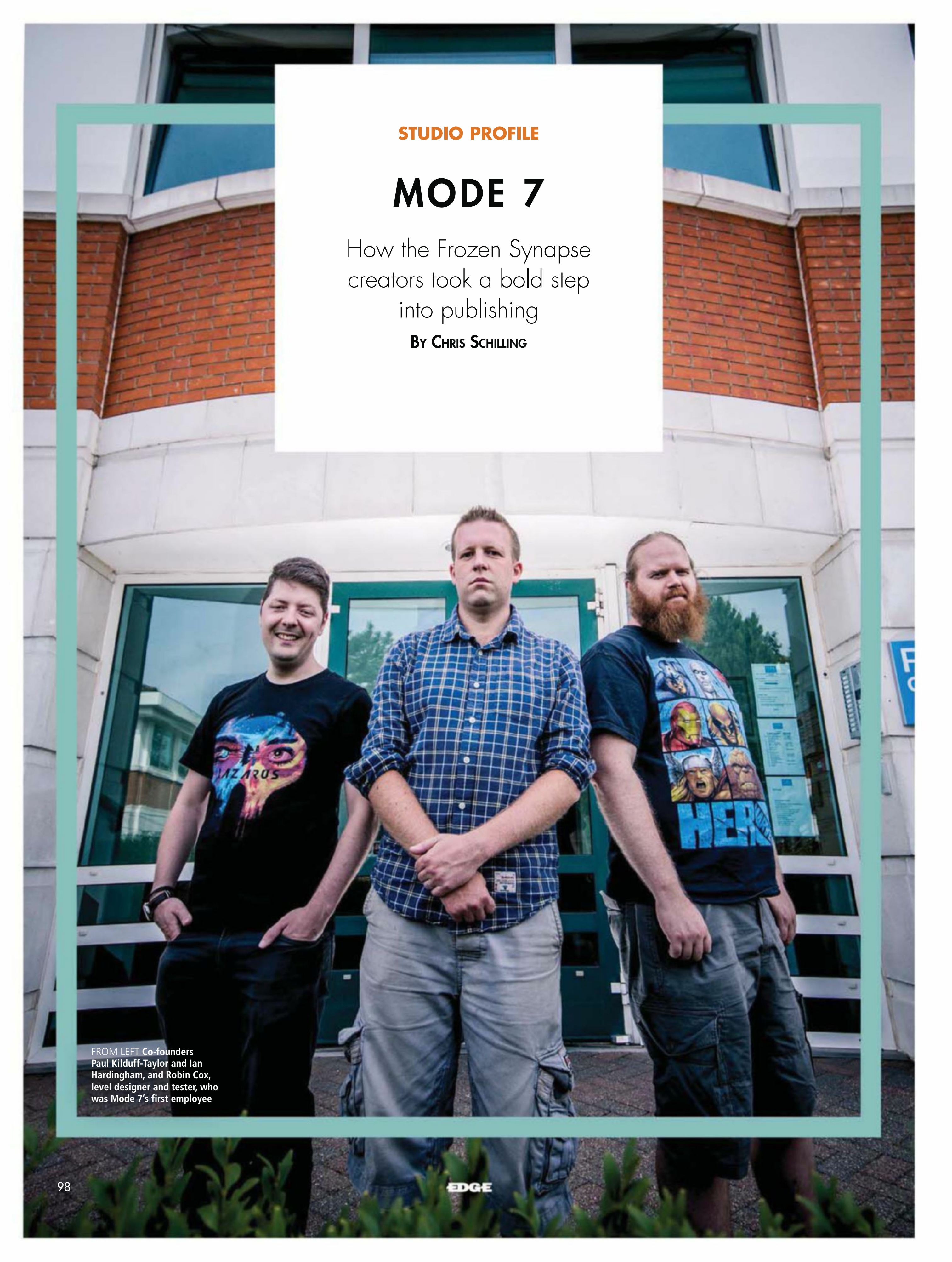


1 The Titans for multiplayer are all role-based, with different capabilities. From left: Ronin, Scorch, Legion, Tone, Ion and Northstar.
2 The 'fastball' sequence, where BT throws the player across the map, was mo-capped by animator Steve Lee Wilson in Respawn's own facility.
3 Maps in multiplayer were designed to the game's two scales: Pilot and Titan. Most buildings are two storeys, giving Titans sightlines to hiding Pilots, while some Titans' flying ability gives access to the roofs.
4 Into The Abyss' vast building-construction facility was nicknamed 'Boomtown' during development. All its moving objects means it features thousands of active entities, something Source wasn't originally built to support









STUDIO PROFILE

MODE 7

How the Frozen Synapse creators took a bold step into publishing

BY CHRIS SCHILLING

FROM LEFT **Co-founders Paul Kilduff-Taylor and Ian Hardingham, and Robin Cox, level designer and tester, who was Mode 7's first employee**

Founded 2005
Employees 7
Key staff Ian Hardingham (co-founder, lead designer, programmer), Paul Kilduff-Taylor (co-founder, composer, writer)
URL www.mode7games.com
Selected softography (as developer) *Determinance, Frozen Synapse, Frozen Cortex* (as publisher) *Tokyo 42, The Colonists*
Current projects *Frozen Synapse 2*

You can't spell 'publisher' without 'pub', so it's fitting that Mode 7's most daring step in its 12 years of operation began with a discussion over drinks down its co-founders' local. The studio's most recent game at the time, *Frozen Cortex*, hadn't been quite as successful as hoped, but it was still profitable. As such, **Ian Hardingham** (lead design, programming) and **Paul Kilduff-Taylor** (music, writing, "other stuff") found themselves in a relatively stable position as they met up to consider their next move.

Now, having published their first title – SMAC Games' stylish isometric shooter *Tokyo 42* – the two can now reflect on what Kilduff-Taylor says was "an overwhelmingly positive" experience. Still, we can't help but wonder whether this tiny team (a nucleus of just four full-time staff is bolstered by regular contractors; Hardingham aptly considers it a core team of seven) might have worried about stretching itself too thinly. Kilduff-Taylor begins to answer, before Hardingham cuts him off mid-flow. "Paul *almost* died," he grins. His friend and colleague laughs it off. "Yeah. I mean, game development is a constant cycle of near-death. But I'm still here!"

Indeed, he's been there since day one, though it was Hardingham who first set up the company. During university, he'd spent his summers at a large game company in Oxford, and while the experience was valuable, he wanted more control over his time. After leaving uni, Hardingham recruited a group of friends to make Mode 7's first release, *Determinance*, an ambitious multiplayer game heavily inspired by *Tribes 2* but with swordfights instead of guns. "I saw that digital distribution was going to mean it was possible to make games without [a publisher], and I thought that indie stuff could really happen," he recalls. "As it turned out, it took a lot longer than I thought." Most of his friends steadily drifted away, but Kilduff-Taylor remained. "And he got all his work in on time," Hardingham adds. "So we officially restarted the company as 50 per cent partners."

A string of contract projects kept the company afloat until its major breakthrough came in 2011. Asynchronous tactical combat game *Frozen Synapse* was an instant hit, affording Hardingham and Kilduff-Taylor the room to think carefully about their next move. "*Frozen Synapse* came out, and then we went into a phase of looking at ways that we could capitalise on that," Kilduff-Taylor says. "There's a lot of talk at the moment about how it was almost easy to be successful on Steam around that time, but we were still aware that once something had worked you needed to do other things around it. So we started off by doing a DLC expansion."


Mode 7 recently moved into new Oxford digs, and warned us in advance about the mess. We've seen worse, honestly

Frozen Synapse Red, released the following year, was as substantial as add-ons of this kind get. It offered cooperative play, a new campaign with challenge missions, and an extra game mode. "We knew that we wanted to continue developing that style of game," Kilduff-Taylor tells us. "But then we definitely went into a consolidation phase. We weren't thinking about publishing at that stage so it was more about how we could establish ourselves as a developer." Hardingham, for his part, was keen to continue tinkering with simultaneous turn-based mechanics, but didn't want to make a direct sequel to *Frozen Synapse* at that stage. "I had a bunch of different places I wanted to go with it, and that's what turned into *Frozen Cortex*," he says.

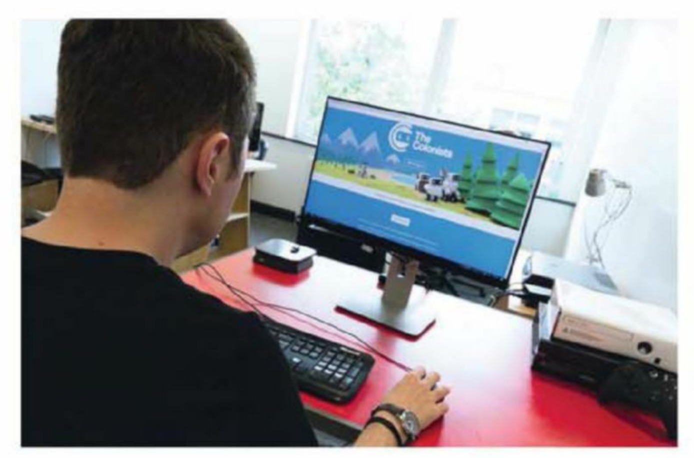
Marrying *Synapse*'s tactical planning systems with a futuristic, gridiron-style sport – a strategic *Speedball*, if you will – *Cortex* launched in 2015 to critical praise, though it failed to match *Frozen Synapse*'s commercial success. But with money rolling in from *Synapse*'s iPad port, as well as a collaboration with Middlesbrough-based studio Double Eleven on console remake *Frozen Synapse Prime*, Mode 7 was in a comfortable position as it celebrated its ten-year anniversary.

The milestone was the ideal time for the two partners to take stock. "We'd noticed that there were a huge number of other devs talking to us," Kilduff-Taylor says. In an increasingly challenging environment for small studios, the two wondered if there might be opportunities to share its knowledge and work with other developers. "Our rate of production was roughly one game every two years, and in that kind of environment we thought it would be nice to add some more strings to our bow," he adds.

That was the initial spark Mode 7 needed. The pair spoke at length with their friend, Positech Games' Cliff Harris, who already had some experience with small-scale publishing, while Kilduff-Taylor's involvement with Indie Fund had reaped positive results. Then Kilduff-Taylor attended Develop Interface, an event for micro-studios to pitch their games, where he met Sean Wright and Maciek Strychalski from SMAC Games. "The developers showed me the game," he says, "and I was instantly blown away by it – I thought it was absolutely amazing that two people could make something that looked and played like that."

"I THOUGHT IT WAS ABSOLUTELY AMAZING THAT TWO PEOPLE COULD MAKE SOMETHING THAT LOOKED LIKE THAT"

The two parties quickly struck a deal. Kilduff-Taylor saw this as an exciting creative opportunity for Mode 7, and from an altruistic standpoint he hoped that his studio's experience might help offset some of the challenges normally faced by fledgling studios. Even so, he admits that *Tokyo 42*'s commercial viability was a key consideration when offering to publish the game. "We have a dual perspective on these things," he says. "It has to be something that's creatively interesting to us. And you can see instantly as soon as you look at [*Tokyo 42*], that it's the work of people who are absolutely driven. So that was important. But you also think, 'How's this going to play when I show it to journalists? How is it going to look in a screenshot? How is it going





One of the benefits of working remotely, Hardingham says, is the comparative lack of conflict: "You can avoid having a difficult working environment on stressful days because you can swear out loud at what Paul's just asked you to do, and go for a walk to calm down"

to look in a trailer or on a Steam store page? I mean, trying to get that balance right is the whole game of gamedev, really."

The studio's shift made sense from a workload angle, too. "I think the really key factor to why we got into publishing is that we have these requirements for who we need on our team to make our games," Hardingham adds. "Our games take a long time to make, and not everyone is busy all of the time. What we've found is that publishing two titles as well as creating our own uses up our capacity much better. The marginal cost of publishing these games is relatively low, because it uses up spare space in the company, and that's really important because games are still a hit-driven business."

Though it involved long hours, late nights and a great deal of hard work, the process has been a positive one for both sides – "It's a tribute to everyone involved that we've been able to get on so well," Kilduff-Taylor says. The publisher stayed closely involved throughout, its ten years' worth of accumulated experience proving vital when it came to discussing potential changes with the developer. Two very different perspectives came into play: Hardingham asked the kind of questions a lead designer might normally think about, while Kilduff-Taylor considered how any adjustments might be received. "We try to be sensitive about not asking for bullshit changes," the latter says. "I find myself saying, 'This sounds like a publisher thing to say, but…' a lot, so you do end up assuming that role. But I think you can advocate for changes from the perspective of genuinely understanding the work it's going to take for someone to make them."

The game's budget was an important consideration, too, and here Mode 7 took a stance of 'do as we say, not as we do'. It had, Hardingham admits, been over time and over budget with all of its previous games – and, indeed, will be with its next. "But we did that really well with *Tokyo 42*," he says, "And if we're going to keep being successful with publishing, we *have* to make sure we hit the right number for where the marketplace is at right now."

Hardingham admits enjoying working on a game where the buck didn't stop with him for once, but he's now back in the box seat for *Frozen Synapse 2*, due for release later this year. This time the hook is 'open-world tactics', as the series' micro game slots into a huge, procedurally generated city. It stems, he says, from a desire to build a satisfying metagame around an already extremely robust tactical core. Which isn't to say that the underlying systems haven't also been tweaked, of course. "Obviously there's been a lot of movement in the base game as well," he says. "We have some really significant changes to the combat. Basically, I always wanted to make a game that made me feel the way I felt when I played *Alpha Centauri*."

It is, he says, "completely, ludicrously ambitious", yet you shouldn't expect Mode 7 to expand any time soon; it's evident that both founders are quite happy to remain small for the time being. "I don't know about Paul, but I don't fantasise about having a team of 50," Hardingham says. "This is really nice and personal." Kilduff-Taylor agrees: "Yeah, neither of us have ever wanted to kind of own or manage a big company. It was always, 'Can we make a game with our friends?' And now we're basically attempting to make a Paradox [Interactive] game with a tiny number of people on a tiny budget."

Having flirted with a higher budget and a larger team size on *Cortex*, they're keen to work more efficiently, to focus on their games' essential qualities without losing sight of their original vision. To which end, they've had to break some old habits. Hardingham works with two other staff in the studio's Oxford HQ, with Kilduff-Taylor alternating between the office and his home in Warwick, while regular collaborators also work remotely. And though they're unlikely to give up the IRC channel they use to communicate with one another ("we're stuck in the '90s," laughs Hardingham), they've made a critical change, with Kilduff-Taylor coming into the office regularly to play *Frozen Synapse 2* with the project lead present. "As a designer, when you're actually watching someone play, you're directly empathising with their experience, which allows you to really co-opt what they're going through," Hardingham says. "It really requires you to mature as a designer, to cast off your hubris, and just be able to sit and take in another person's unvarnished thought process about your game."

It's that same willingness to evolve the way it works that should see Mode 7 achieve as much as a publisher as it has in its 12 years as a developer. But after some time focusing on the business, we're sure plenty will raise a glass to the news that this industrious studio is ready to exercise its creative muscles once more. ■

"I ALWAYS WANTED TO MAKE A GAME THAT MADE ME FEEL THE WAY I FELT WHEN I PLAYED ALPHA CENTAURI"



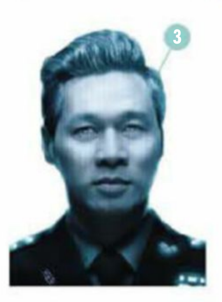












1 The commentators' snarky, funny exchanges enliven *Frozen Cortex*'s tactical action.
2 *The Colonists* will be Mode 7's second game as publisher, a settlement building sim by one-man studio Codebyfire.
3 *Frozen Synapse 2* has been in development for two years.
4 *Tokyo 42* was Mode 7's publishing debut, launching day and date on PC and Xbox



PLAY

REVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. INTERVIEWS. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Ultra Street Fighter II
Switch
With the online playerbase dwindling, *Ultra* is now largely a singleplayer pursuit, and a quick blast through Arcade mode is now one of our favourite ways to wind down at the end of a long day. It's as much of a puzzle game as it is a fighter, requiring knowledge of each opponent's AI routines and how best to exploit them. These are lessons we first learned over 20 years ago, and still enjoy putting into practice today.

Fire Emblem Heroes
iOS
It's been a while, so we thought we'd check in on Intelligent Systems' iOS debut. *Heroes* has come on a lot: it's packed with things to do and generous to a fault with its various in-game currencies. But that four-character party system, and those small single-screen maps, mean we don't stick around for long. Unfortunately, structure counts for little when the foundations that underpin it are so drab.

Arms
Switch
A slender launch offering suggested *Arms* would follow the *Splatoon* model of regular, free post-launch updates, and so it has proved, with final boss Max Brass recently unlocked and a new mode being added to Nintendo's rangey online brawler. It's an approach that Nintendo is already seeming comfortable with, then, but there's one thing we weren't prepared for: an exhaustive list of character-balance changes in which Nintendo publicly cops to its design missteps one animation frame at a time.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE




Explore the iPad edition of **Edge** for extra Play content



Style counsel

You'll find few games more worthy of the term 'sequel' than *Splatoon 2* (p104). This is simply more *Splatoon* – it looks better, it has more stuff in it, and some of the old bits have been made bigger. It's vintage sequel-making, in other words, and that's no slur. Indeed, it's probably the best thing Nintendo could have done for its unique take on the concept of the online shooter. Not enough people played the original on Wii U. So, make it again, and sell some more. Makes sense.

Yet elsewhere this month are games from studios who could quite easily have done the same thing, but have chosen not to. Take *Pyre* (p108): few would have complained had Supergiant knocked out another isometric action-RPG in the vein of its previous games, *Bastion* and *Transistor*. Instead, the studio has remade *The Banner Saga* through the lens of *NBA Jam*.



Similarly, Ninja Theory has declined to simply make another riotous hack-and-slash action game. *Hellblade* (p112) may bear the studio's signature at times, and it certainly won't be remembered as the developer's best work. But it is a well-intentioned, heartfelt study of mental illness, which is quite the thematic leap for a studio whose previous game was a reboot of a Japanese action classic.

Sometimes a rest is better than a change. *Tacoma* (p114) suffers in comparison to its developer's past work. *Tiny Trax* (p121) sees Futurlab swap the sci-fi shooting of *Velocity* for a thirdperson, VR-enabled Scalextric set, and on balance we'd rather the studio had stuck to its old guns. And while it's nowhere near as bad as we'd feared, the side-scrolling *Hey! Pikmin* (p120) certainly can't hold a candle to its 3D ancestors. Not even Nintendo, after all, can possibly make the right call every time.

Splatoon 2

From 'stay fresh' to refresh in two years, then. *Splatoon 2* is an unusually expeditious Nintendo sequel, but then it didn't have much choice: the first game's phenomenal success in Japan, despite being hamstrung by the poor sales of the platform, meant a swift follow-up wasn't so much a likelihood as a cast-iron certainty. It's no surprise, therefore, to discover that in real terms, not an awful lot has changed; the whiff of familiarity will be even stronger among those who tuned in for the climactic Splatfest a year ago. But that, you sense, is rather the point. There's nothing here to upset established splatters, yet it retains the inclusiveness that first attracted so many players to a genre to which they'd never previously warmed. In other words, it's the kind of incremental sequel that could give incremental sequels a good name.

And, in all fairness, it does obey Miyamoto's rule – you know, the one that's seen F-Zero lie dormant since the GameCube era – that any sequel needs a unique hook. Salmon Run is a new wave-based cooperative battle mode, where a shady back-alley business recruits teams of up to four freelancers to accept a high-risk posting collecting golden eggs from spawning Salmonids. It's a horde variant, after a fashion, set on a small island surrounded by murky seas and foreboding, deep orange skies – a world away from the permanently sunny Inkopolis. The snaggle-toothed, pan-wielding grunts come thick and fast, but are easily dealt with. A range of bosses, from a fish riding a giant mechanical eel to a behemoth who squeezes out fat ink bombs from his head, present a far greater threat. Avoiding them isn't good enough, since they yield the eggs you need to complete your job. Hit your quota for three increasingly difficult waves and you're shipped back home; exceed it, and you'll progress through pay grades rather quicker, unlocking exclusive gear to use in the other modes and meal tickets you can spend in the hub.

Hang about: three waves? Yes, that might seem slight, but anyone who's played *Splatoon* will know an awful lot can happen in five minutes. If anything, it's even more chaotic than the Ranked modes: the top end of the Part-Timer pay bracket (135 per cent) might see you battling five bosses at once; if you last more than 30 seconds at 200 per cent, you're doing extremely well. At low tide, you'll be dragged towards the shores, where you've less time to react to threats, and are at greater risk of having your prize snatched back and dragged beneath the surface. When the waters rise and the fog rolls in, you'll be huddled together on a cramped platform, trying desperately to remember to leap the mesh bridge you fell through in the last round to escape that hail of missiles. And that's before night falls. If the thrills of a good Horde mode are sometimes diluted by length, this compact, concentrated version proves the value of brevity. It's exhausting, stressful and quite brilliant.

Developer/publisher Nintendo (EPD)
Format Switch
Release Out now

It's the kind of incremental sequel that could give incremental sequels a good name



You can host or join a local game at any time, but as with all other multiplayer game types outside the standard Turf War mode, Salmon Run is only available to play at set times – though its schedule is very different from the competitive options. Ranked matches still only give you access to two stages and a single mode, though the selection is now switched out every two hours instead of four. The new League Battle mode – available for set teams who've collectively reached the heady heights of B-rank – offers two more, so the best players have six stages available at any given time. There are no such restrictions on Private battles, and in theory, Switch's success should open those up to a much wider audience; likewise, a new smartphone app will allow you to play and voice chat with friends.

The structure is a little different, then, but the underlying foundations of these boisterous skirmishes are left mostly untouched. There are, however, a range of small interface refinements – tweaks now allow you to see the main weapon every player is carrying at a glance, and when they're ready to unleash their special; when you're splatted, you'll get a glimpse at their gear perks, so you can see why you didn't spot their approach, or how their bog-standard Splattershot has such stopping power. And, someday, we may even get used to the fact that X no longer makes you jump. At least we got a good look at our teammates' positions during that attempted leap from the top of Moray Towers.

There's plenty more where those came from. Splat Zones now let you keep tabs on the objective without having to bring up the map, so you have a better idea of when to rush in and when to hang back and wait for support. Tower Control now forces you to wait at checkpoints for the slowest eight seconds of your life – at least until you arrive at the third and final one closest to the enemy base. The titular weapon in the gridiron-like Rainmaker takes greater skill to wield effectively here; it doesn't take as long to charge, but nor is its explosive burst as powerful as before. There are adjustments to the scoring system, too, with substantial XP bonuses for successive triumphs, in recognition of your current form, or 'freshness'. And post-match stats no longer reveal just how often you've been splatted, replacing that tally with the number of specials you used. It's a tiny but potentially vital difference, certain to prove more encouraging to those who may have felt sufficiently shamed by their K/D ratio to quit.

Lag is an occasional, rather than a frequent annoyance, and it's been disguised more cleverly – or differently, at any rate. You'll notice it when an opponent shrugs off several hits as if they were wearing steel armour. Granted, sometimes they pretty much are; one special gives your whole team temporary protection from a single, normally-fatal hit. But it's galling ▶

ABOVE Rollers will now change orientation when you flick them while jumping – ink spread is much narrower, but it travels further, giving you an advantage over those with shorter-range weapons. **RIGHT** These gushing geysers are just one way to get around in the campaign. Elsewhere, you'll find floating grapple points to latch onto by firing Charger shots or bombs, alongside boost pads and ink rails to swim or grind along



BELOW Happily, only a handful of exclusive outfits are locked behind Amiibo this time out, and you can save loadouts to individual figures, letting you quickly switch between them before starting a new mode





ABOVE Marina and Pearl are fine replacements for the Squid Sisters – they'll briskly run you through the current stage selection at the start of each session, rather than popping up every time the rota changes

when the first spot of ink from the fast-firing, but comparatively feeble, Splat Dualies hits you and you instantly perish. Still, after more than 50 hours of play we've not encountered any teleporting Inklings, nor have we seemingly survived any close-range splat-offs only to suddenly explode three seconds later.

There's a stronger consistency to the map design, with fewer obvious gimmicks, notwithstanding a platform that moves between vertical and horizontal positions on Sturgeon Shipyard. Whether you're playing on Starfish Mainstage (a concert venue) or The Reef (a hangout spot surrounded by fashion emporiums) you'll have plenty of room to build up your special meter between your base and a central area around which the fiercest exchanges take place. Outside routes offer alternative angles of attack from a head-on assault on the main control zone, which makes them a little tougher to hold. On Humpback Pump Track, you can win by inking the bumps and dips of the track that runs around the edges, without having to risk a leap to the hill in the middle. The two huge slopes leading to the central platform in extreme-sports venue Musselforge Fitness are rarely painted the same colour. It's harder for snipers to keep teams pinned down, even on the returning Moray Towers, with ink rails letting you zip between those long ramps. And a revamped Port Mackerel now lets you avoid lanes patrolled by Splatling players with ink sponges that let you leap across the forklifts and cargo containers instead.

A host of new specials also helps make last-minute swings more likely. Rain from an ink cloud doesn't do much direct damage, but could weaken enemies enough to make them easier to finish off. A rush of curling stones – launched by a device resembling the Nintendo Ultra Machine, a delightful deep-cut reference – will not only flush out dug-in enemies but might also swing the result on the buzzer, as they slide out in all directions before bursting. And then there's the Splashdown, an AOE attack that's essentially a messier version of a Titan's Fist of Havoc in *Destiny* and every bit as satisfying. Activating it mid-Super Jump to slam down and kill an entire team in Splat Zones is the kind of moment that makes you wish for a replay function.

Perhaps that's one for a future update – and if *Splatoon*'s generous content rollout is anything to go by, you can reasonably expect this to grow substantially. Two more maps – a galleon and a skate park – are on the immediate horizon, and we wouldn't bet against them being available as you read this. *Splatoon* started with five maps and finished with 16; we have eight to begin with here, and it would be a surprise if the sequel didn't at least match the first game's tally.

Evaluating what might be is a fool's errand, of course. We can only judge what's in front of us, and in truth there's little with which to pick serious fault – beyond, perhaps, a lack of ambition, the difficulty of teaming up with friends in Turf War (you'll be put on opposing teams as often as not), and the inability to exit lobbies without quitting the game. Still, if the thrill of the new is gone, old pleasures remain: the exhilaration of the final-minute countdown as the music increases in tempo, or the ice-cream jingle of the Tower as it advances into enemy territory. Crucially, that infectiously exuberant spirit is undimmed. More of the same? For once, that'll do nicely.

8

The Inkjet seems like one of the most powerful specials at first, but it makes you a target for players on high ground. We prefer Tenta Missiles – head back to base and you can usually lock on to all four opponents



SPLAT'S THE ONE

Like the first game, the singleplayer Hero Mode is over in a brisk few hours, but its five-world campaign is more diverse and accomplished, offering an assured blend of shooting and inventive traversal – not least in the hub levels, where locating the stages is part of the fun. Its story is linked to the result of the first game's final Splatfest, and features the two Squid Sisters: Callie is missing, and Marie charges you with finding her. For the most part, this simply recasts Marie as your handler, advising you on how to deal with trickier hazards, but that all changes in a final encounter, though it struggles to live up to the original's extended climax. Still, an outstanding credits sequence should send you off with a smile.

Post Script

What Salmon Run says about the current state of play at Nintendo

Looking back, the release of *Splatoon* seems increasingly like one of the most significant milestones in Nintendo's recent history. It was the first successful return from the company's internal development program, Garage, the self-styled 'after-school club' set up to allow younger developers the opportunity to brainstorm ideas under Miyamoto's supervision. With hindsight, this was the start of Nintendo's slow changing of the guard, which over the course of the last couple of years has seen older figures depart (one, of course, well before his time) and fresh faces taking their place – and, more significantly, shaping the company's creative direction.

Since much of *Splatoon 2* is familiar, it's Salmon Run that exemplifies where Nintendo currently stands. Its art direction alone says much: with its dark skies and toxic waters, its sickly mix of lurid paint and the slime green trails of the strikingly ugly Salmonid, it's a look that definitely skews away from Nintendo's bigger brands, and even puts a little distance between itself and the happy vibrancy elsewhere in Inkopolis. It's weirder, more threatening, more dangerous: a sign not just of a new generation of artists and designers starting to come through and express themselves, but of a desire to appeal to a different market. Nintendo surely recognises that very young players are more likely to be given a tablet rather than a console these days to keep them occupied; this feels like an acknowledgement of a need to reach a slightly older audience.

Introducing a horde mode variant as one of the main attractions for returning players shows once again that Nintendo has been looking at other games for inspiration. Just as *Breath Of The Wild* took an askance look at established open world ideas, and *ARMS* sought to reinvent the one-on-one fighter, Salmon Run presents a very Nintendo spin on genre standards. In setting you quotas of golden eggs to be retrieved, it doesn't allow you to simply dig in and play defensively: eventually you're going to have to run (or swim) headlong towards the melee and hope you make it back. The objective and the time limit combine to add extra pressure without simply resorting to throwing more enemies at you – though it does that anyway, and doesn't wait until you're 10 minutes in before the action reaches fever pitch. It's a distillation of what works elsewhere, focusing the fun and tension into a little over five exhilarating minutes. It makes the game both more convenient to play and incredibly moreish.

Nintendo has rarely been afraid of demanding plenty from players, but there's been a clear step up in the difficulty of its games since the friendlier, more welcoming years of the Wii and DS, as it re-embraces its arcade-era sensibilities. You could see a glimpse of it in *NintendoLand*, especially the testing *Donkey Kong*'s Crash Course levels. The final stage in *Super Mario 3D World*, Champion's Road, is considered one of the toughest levels in any *Mario* game. And make no mistake, at the top level Salmon Run is up there with *The Lost Levels* and its ilk, among the most difficult Nintendo games ever made. The third-highest hazard level will likely defeat most players, and the penalties are severe: failure will see you drop a pay grade.

In setting you quotas of golden eggs to be retrieved, it doesn't allow you to simply dig in and play defensively



That alone marks an intriguing step: Nintendo's not one for punishing players quite like this. You could say it's no different from dropping a rank in the fiercely-fought competitive modes, though at least there you can blame other people rather than Nintendo's designers. But the fact that Nintendo feels confident in setting players that kind of challenge shows that it recognises a game originally aimed at welcoming newcomers to online shooters – as opposed to alienating less experienced or less capable players – has become, for want of a better term, hardcore.

It bears some of its maker's more polarising idiosyncrasies, too. Though it's not bound to the same two-hour rota as the other multiplayer modes, it will only be available to play online at limited times. The official line is that it's supposed to echo the spawning patterns of real-world salmon, but a more likely excuse is either to avoid server overload, or to ensure the player base isn't too widely split between the various modes, in order to cut down on matchmaking times. It's a sign that while Nintendo is prepared to take some risks, it's still cautious when it comes to online: it would be a surprise if *Splatoon 2*'s sales didn't quickly eclipse the first game, which would render such a move unnecessary. Then again, maybe it knows exactly what it's doing – after all, Nintendo's strategy of withholding features was what kept a lot of players coming back to the original. If it worked before, why change things?

In a game designed to incentivise teamwork and communication, you could argue that limiting its online availability helps shift the focus onto its permanently-available local play option, where Salmon Run will really come into its own. But that decision reveals another truth: Nintendo knows well enough that Japanese players are more likely to gather together for multiplayer sessions than their counterparts overseas. It's a reminder that, while it may be looking more closely at western games, in terms of its audience Nintendo's chief focus is, as it always has been, Japan. It goes without saying that you can tell a lot about a developer from the games it makes, but for a famously inscrutable company like Nintendo, Salmon Run feels particularly revealing about where it stands – with a few clues, perhaps, to where it's heading. ■

Pyre

A journey through purgatory would seem like the ideal time to get off the wagon. In *Pyre*, however, getting back on it is part of what makes a supposedly hellish trek so pleasurable. It may seem cramped, but we have a variety of trinkets marking our achievements and commemorating the places we've stopped along the way. There's a strange floating object we can bat around, a lute which doubles as a jukebox for Darren Korb's nimble score, and a large bell – though we haven't rung that for a while, for reasons we shan't reveal. It's a place to take a load off, to chat with our fellow exiles, or to catch up on some light reading. We're supposed to want to leave this place, but over 15 hours, this ramshackle transport has come to feel like home.

The views aren't bad either. Jen Zee's richly evocative art is saturated in vibrant colour, conjuring clearly inhospitable but often strikingly beautiful environments. Jagged icebergs jut from frigid waters, wisps of toxic gas rising from bubbling pools of lurid green as swirling tempests rage and steam hisses from boiling fissures. This is the Downside, a world into which you've been cast for crimes committed in the Commonwealth. Three others, similarly cast out, find you and bring you on board, before inviting you to translate the text of a mystical tome that leads you towards a ritual which may yet prove to be your way out.

These are the Rites, essentially an ancient form of three-on-three basketball. Two pyres lie at either end of the arena, and your job is to douse your opponents' flame by dunking a celestial orb into it. The damage you deal is dependent on the player: the hulking demon Jodariel and the slippery crone Bertrude do more than tiny Wyrm-Knight Sir Gilman and Rukey, a dog with a Terry Thomas moustache. But their bulk means it's harder for them to get there. Once in possession of the ball, the protective aura that surrounds them dissipates, leaving them vulnerable to attack, either from an opposing player walking into them, or casting their aura outwards in a straight line. You can, however, dodge those attacks by dashing away, or leaping over them – or even by hurling the ball at your opponent and casting your aura as soon as they catch it. But scoring also leaves you disadvantaged, since the player who reached the pyre will be briefly banished from the game, lending it some of basketball's back-and-forth rhythm.

You'll be frequently convinced that certain characters or moves are overpowered, not least when combined with unlocked abilities and equippable talismans whose buffs can be further enhanced by purchasing stardust from a travelling vendor. But there's a counter for just about everything. Extend the flutter time of flying imp Ti'Zo, and he can be tough to deal with – though a well-timed leap is enough to dispossess him. Rukey's lightning pace, similarly, can quickly take him behind an opponent's backline. With a souped-up jump, he's hard to stop, but then your opponent can always protect their pyre by placing large units close to the base, and to one another, which in turn expands their auras.

It favours physicality over responsiveness, forcing you to commit to your actions while giving you a stronger sense of each character. Jodariel's steps are slow and deliberate, and you can almost feel the ground shake when she lands from a jump. Bertrude is ponderous at walking pace, but hold the trigger and she'll speedily slither along. The momentum of smaller, faster characters can be tricky to arrest, too. Change direction with Rukey and he skids around like an *OutRun* drift, and you risk grazing an enemy aura if you don't manage his acceleration carefully.

There's a sense of weight elsewhere, too. In the early stages, the narrative gives you just enough context to make each Rite feel like it matters. The story might continue after a defeat, allowing you to regroup, but you're losing your opportunity to level up to give yourself a better chance of winning later events. You'll still be able to pick up some slack on your travels, with forking paths letting you decide, for example, between Rukey collecting on a debt, or following Jodariel's hunch about rare (and thus highly sellable) flora. And at rest stops, you can mentor an individual teammate, study for small universal team gains, or forage for supplies to trade at the market. But a narrative shift raises the stakes, making a loss harder to take, since the final Rite of a star cycle means one of your number can go free.

It's a bittersweet moment. There's a tension between selfishly wanting to keep someone around for their skill in the Rites and the feeling that they've earned their right to return to the Commonwealth. But would it be even more selfless to throw the game and let the captain of the opposing team go back? In most cases, you'll want to win, since your opponents are often arrogant, nasty or downright malevolent, but one or two have nobler aims, or more complex motivations, and seem equally deserving of redemption.

As the cycles continue, these opponents come to feel like proper rivals. And the lightweight difficulty on Normal – we finished with an unblemished record – is less of a problem when you gain the ability to modify the challenge by calling upon the stars to hasten your opponents' return from banishment, or to reduce your pyre's flame before the match has even begun. A newly gained ability to travel quickly between Rites doesn't entirely prevent repetition from setting in, and the loss of favoured allies can leave you stuck with characters whose personalities and attributes make the closing stretch drag a little. Still, if *Pyre* never quite feels like a classic sporting struggle, your ragtag band of rebels and their delightful mobile home are a heartwarming upside to life on the Downside.

8

Developer/publisher Supergiant Games
Format PC, PS4 (tested)
Release Out now

You'll want to win, since your opponents are often arrogant, nasty or malevolent



IN ITS RITE PLACE
Supergiant does its best to enforce tactical adjustments by varying the arena environments, and while you'll mostly end up reverting to reliable fallbacks, the differences are just enough to keep you on your toes. One venue is pocked with mounds of stardust that can protect you from incoming auras; another features sliding stones which you can push around to stay in cover; a third has thick tangles of vines gradually encroach on the play area, giving you less room to outmanoeuvre your opponent. Later, you'll play on a pitch patrolled by excitable imps, whom you're encouraged to impress by performing certain feats during a match – like using a specific character to douse the Pyre, or banishing all three opponents at once – which will earn you a larger post-match purse.

RIGHT Goodness, it's pretty, and that's before you've seen it in motion. Transitions between areas are particularly lovely, as your wagon handily transforms into a boat to cross treacherous seas. **MAIN** Opponents improve after the first time you play them, making the return match more challenging. When their pyre is close to being snuffed out, they gain buffs and may play more aggressively. **BOTTOM** Away from the story, you can conduct a Rite against the CPU or another local player. While it loses something for the lack of any real stake in the outcome, it's a welcome opportunity to play as one of the other captains









ABOVE Ostensibly one of the more ordinary characters, all-rounder Hedwyn is such an affable, generous chap that you'll be loath to see him go. We selfishly kept him around until our guilt eventually got the better of us

Post Script

Greg Kasavin, writer/designer, Supergiant Games

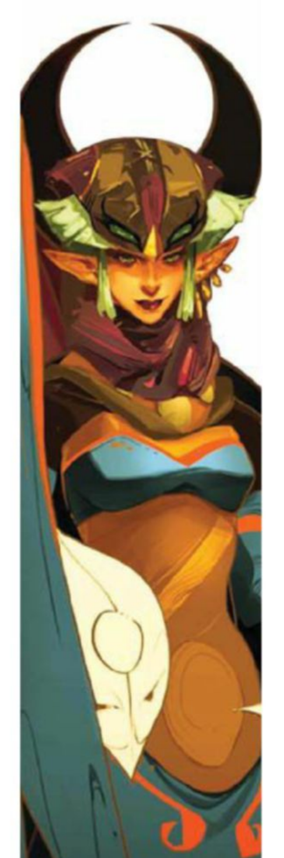
After more than a decade in games criticism, Greg Kasavin moved to EA and then 2K Games before joining Supergiant Games, where he has written and co-designed the studio's three games, *Bastion*, *Transistor* and now *Pyre*. Here, he discusses critics, teamwork and why the studio's latest game was the biggest challenge of his career.



You seemed unsure about how *Pyre* would be received. Does your background in criticism make you more anxious about that critical response?
If anything my background as a game critic makes me more resilient to criticism. I would be the worst kind of hypocrite if reviews upset me, having reviewed games for 12 years. I feel deeply at peace with what criticism is; I find it incredibly valuable. I'm happy that each of the games we've made has provoked some thoughtful criticism that I've enjoyed taking in – and that's not just when someone thinks our game is great (laughs).

It seems like this was a very personal project for you.
I've known for three years that we were making something pretty unusual. Each of our games on paper has been deeply ill-advised as a concept. We would always joke with *Bastion* that it's an action-RPG where an old man talks to you the whole time. It sounds terrible when you put it that way, and I think all of our games can be described in a deeply reductive way that really doesn't capture what I know is special about them to a lot of people, because we've gotten that feedback. This one is definitely our biggest project, it once again pushed us out of our creative comfort zone, and in terms of my own contribution to it, it's the biggest writing challenge I've ever had in my life. But it's been a very personal project for all of us. There's 12 of us on the team, and we put a lot of ourselves into our games. It's never part of our thought process to make things that are different for the sake of it. We just make things that are exciting to us as a team and that's always been a good North Star for us to follow – that if we're excited about what we're doing, then it's going to translate to our audience and create a unique experience for them.

Each of our games on paper has been deeply ill-advised as a concept



In the pre-alpha build we played a year or so ago, you had to maintain your wagon's fuel supply to get to each Rite. Why was that cut?
At the time we were experimenting with more resource systems and things of that nature. So you had a certain amount of days to get to the next Rite, and if you ran out of fuel, you would have to waste a day scrounging for it. A lot of these systems were interesting to us intellectually, but when we played with them, they slowed the pace of the game down much more than we liked. *Pyre* is a game that takes its time, but we wanted for players to be able to get to the next Rite quickly if they wanted. A lot of the narrative content in the game is optional, and if you just want to beeline from one Rite to the next, you can do so in a few minutes. But with all those other systems, it made traversing the world feel really grindy – and it also set up consequences that were at odds with the idea of not having failure states.

Logan Cunningham does a great job as the Rites' MC – maybe too good, as it seems some people don't recognise it's him.
It's been ironic for us, it went from being amusing to us actually starting to feel bad because so many people don't realise it's him. If I was someone who could experience pride in anything, something I would feel proud of would be that everyone who worked on *Bastion* also worked together on *Transistor*, and now on this game. The fact that we've been together as a team for a long time is something that feels good. With *Pyre*, we were all chasing after things that we thought would be fun to do, and we'd figure out how to make it all fit together later. In the case of Logan, he's portrayed these relatively stoic-sounding characters in our previous games, but in person he does this really funny impression of Gandalf, and this hifalutin wizard voice that he does definitely inspired aspects of the character. We wrote the character for him, and it happened to align with other ideas that we had. It was fun to write and for him to record, and it felt good to us really quickly.

Did that strong team bond help you to capture that sense of camaraderie among the Nightwings in your writing?
For sure, my experience working as part of a team became deeply inspirational to that aspect of the story. That sense of characters who are not alike having to, in some cases, set aside differences to work together, where these characters' personal goals are intertwined with a shared goal. It felt really satisfying to work on a story where these characters were ultimately very genuine with each other, despite initial appearances. So much character-driven media today goes to a place of building up emotional investment, only to quite literally assassinate the characters, and one's emotions. You can get that kind of reaction from people by killing off a character they love, but I wanted to write a story where the emotional depth came from something more positive. And that is very much tied to the positive emotions involved in being on a team that can work through thick and thin, where people can pick each other up through their setbacks and celebrate their successes together. ■


XBOX ONE


Windows 10

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice

Much has been sacrificed here, although it shouldn't come as a total surprise. Created by a team of just 20 and self-published, Ninja Theory was always putting itself in a tricky position with *Hellblade*. Its intentions were noble: to make a game centered around the still-taboo subject of mental illness. Bolstered by the studio's trademark graphical flair, smooth thirdperson hack-and-slash combat and a reduced price point, the aim was to revive the 'double-A' game in a meaningful way. Unfortunately Ninja Theory is so focused on its novel, in-game portrayal of psychosis that it has forgotten to build a decent game around it.

It is undoubtedly well-meaning. Novice actress Melina Juergens turns in an excellent performance as psychotic protagonist Senua, who has a truly harrowing time of it. Senua's first death is a particularly awful experience. The combination of Ninja Theory's mocap work and Juergens' nerve-shredding shrieks makes Suena's demise feel uncomfortably real, and more than justifies the pre-game warning screen. Startup disclaimers are nothing new, but here players are consenting to put themselves in a state of psychological distress, especially given one of the main mechanics is an approximation of what it's like to suffer audiovisual hallucinations. Using 3D binaural sound, mocking whispers swirl back and forth inside the headset almost constantly while you are controlling Senua.

Ninja Theory has worked with neuroscience and psychology experts to recreate what it feels like to hear voices, and its implementation, even without a frame of reference, is deeply affecting. The voices are not always talking to Senua, sometimes merely about her: hissing spitefully about her inadequacies as a warrior, a daughter, a lover. If you're struggling to finish a puzzle, there's a sting as they chuckle at your slowness; sometimes they deign to give you helpful clues. In combat, they recommend you block a blow, dodge, or back away, and when we catch ourselves wishing aloud that they would pipe down, it's clear that Ninja Theory has achieved the desired effect.

If only the rest of the game could meet that bar. There are, barring a couple of weak exceptions, only two kinds of puzzle. Opening doors sealed by runic shapes involves using a zoomed-in Focus ability to find and line up the shapes with matching environmental objects – tree branches, architecture, shadows and so on. The process is clumsily introduced, cast in darkness and dependent on backtracking. With no tutorial to speak of, we solve it accidentally.

The second kind is more inventive – not that that's saying much – and concerns illusion: circular gates that reveal invisible walkways once looked through, perhaps, or Focusing in the right spot to align translucent shards and create a path. Both kinds are insufferable by game's end, repeated endlessly with little in the way of expansion or variety. The logic behind them is simple. The execution of them is anything but: unreadable level design and terrible signposting thwart us at every turn.

Developer/publisher Ninja Theory
Format PC, PS4 (tested)
Release Out now

Here players are consenting to put themselves in a state of psychological distress



FEATURE COMPLETE
For all its flaws, *Hellblade* is undoubtedly well-researched – something that was made clear during the game's very public development process, which has been condensed in an accompanying 'making of' feature. Edited by Ninja Theory video editor Melina Juergens – yes, Senua herself – it's a deep dive into the process of making the final product. The historical context of the game is fascinating, as is the science behind Senua's psychosis and how it is implemented in-game. Insight into the technology powering it all, too, is worth a watch. There's no way to fast-forward or rewind the feature, and it comes with a spoiler warning, so is definitely best viewed after a playthrough.

The combat, fluid as it first seems, suffers the same problem. Unaided, you must work out the controls by yourself, though the system is minimal enough that it works: there are light and heavy attacks, a dodge, a close-up melee, and a block. It's all responsive, sure, and some experimental mashing yields gruesome combos. Against enemies acting alone or in small groups, it's fine, stick flicks moving the auto-locked camera between them and any ambushes a consequence of your own bad positioning. Enemy attacks have huge wind-ups, and the AI baddies politely take turns.

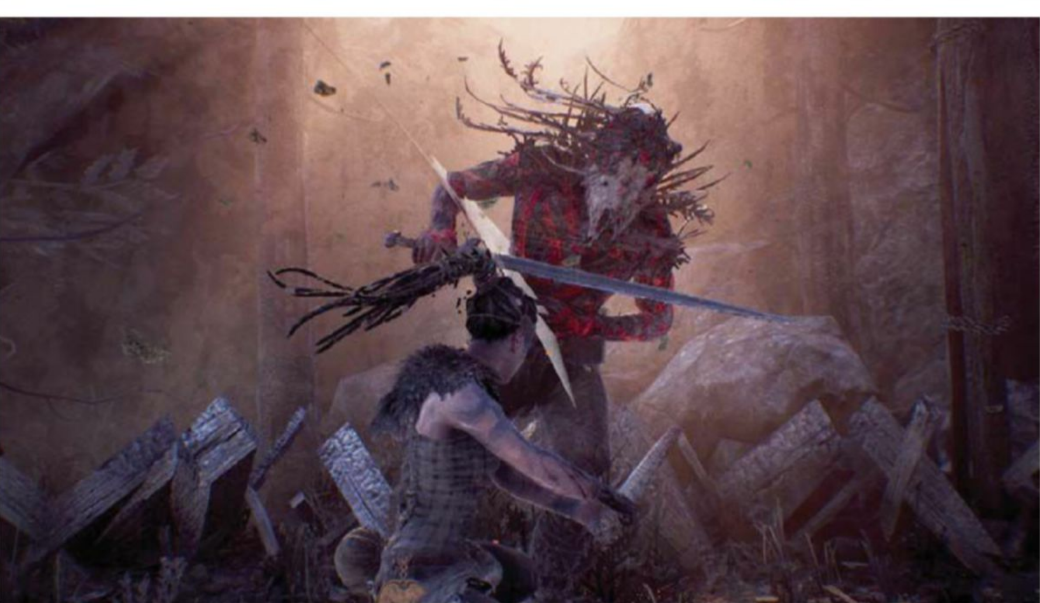
Yet when larger mobs arrive, things quickly become infuriating. Wrangling the camera is impossible: you're unable to unlock the view, and it will auto-switch to whichever enemy hit you last, leaving you disoriented and without adequate control over or escape from a 360-degree attack. *Hellblade*'s way of increasing difficulty is to throw more of the same grunts at you in increasingly populated, tedious and exasperating encounters. All is made particularly terrifying by a gimmick revealed early on: die too many times throughout the game, and the rot in Senua's arm will reach her head, whereupon it is game over and all progress is wiped. Perhaps this is merely an attempt to induce paranoia in the player; we don't plan on sticking around long enough to find out.

And that's your lot, over and over, for eight hours. Perhaps a second run might make more sense of the incomprehensible story, a scattered tale spanning Norse mythology and personal grief that tries to be significant but ends up approaching parody at the close. Most disappointingly, the relatively brief runtime struggles to support *Hellblade*'s sole inspiration, Senua's psychosis. Despite apparently going to great lengths to avoid cliché, too much of *Hellblade*'s depiction of Senua's affliction takes the form of lengthy stretches of our hero kneeling with head in hands screaming, looking at autonomous doppelgangers in mirrors, and chief antagonist Hela repeating the same vague lines about 'the darkness inside'. Even the hallucinations grow tired and schlocky by the second hour, the two well-spoken female voices relaxing into a rhythm of stating the blindingly obvious and helping you out in puzzles. Ultimately what was intended as a thoughtful depiction of a terrible mental illness has ended up casting it as something of an asset: a helpful superpower that can give you the strength to soldier on through the darkness, so long as you can put up with the odd breakdown here and there. That, we suspect, was not what Ninja Theory intended. It's certainly not what we had hoped for.

4

ABOVE Focus in on runestones dotted around the environments, and the voice of Senua's friend Druth tells Norse folk tales.

LEFT *Hellblade*'s end boss is the ultimate form of its poor combat – ever-growing groups of impossible-to-track grunts, followed by the cheapest trick in videogames



BELOW Focusing slows down enemy time. Without a tutorial, we don't clock that the voices telling us to 'Focus!' in battle are actually referring to a mechanic



ABOVE The locations of solutions to the rune-gate puzzles are signalled by their associated symbols floating in the air nearby. This, at least, helps make getting through the repetitive puzzles a quick process



Tacoma

Cor, those lifts look fun. Simply grab on to a handle, put one foot in a pedal and you're away, whisked automatically at high speed from the zero-gravity hub of the Tacoma Lunar Observation System to one of its departments. To botany, you say? We'll be there in a jiffy. Cryogenics needs our attention? Close your eyes and count to ten. Interdepartmental transition has never been so fun.

If, say, the Tacoma needed an office delivery boy, we'd be all over it. But the station is staffed by just six people, all brought on to perform a specific, and essential, role. Most, however, have also taken on some, well, extracurricular duties. Station administrator EV St James is coupled up with operations specialist Clive Siddiqi – their pillow talk must be an absolute hoot – while engineer Roberta Williams and network expert Natali Kuroshenko are also an item. The two remaining wallflowers are firm friends, though it's seemingly gone no further than that. The botanist, Andrew Dagyab, is too preoccupied with somehow saving his ailing marriage while stuck high in the sky; Sareh Hasmadi, the doctor, has never been the same since suffering a professional injustice earlier in her career.

They're a diverse bunch, then – or rather, they were, since by the time we meet them, they're all gone. Like developer Fullbright's first game, the walking-sim-cum-1990s-love-letter *Gone Home*, *Tacoma* puts you in the shoes of a female protagonist – this time named Amy Ferrier – arriving in a mysteriously empty place. Yet instead of a home, it's a space station, and instead of picking through the bric-a-brac of suburban American life, you're combing through AR logs that replay scenes from the crew's final hours.

Ferrier may be our walking window onto this sci-fi world, but it becomes quickly apparent that she is not the focal point of *Tacoma*'s tale. That honour goes to Odin, an autonomous AI which is, despite St James' notional position of power among the team, the real captain of the ship. While this floating polygonal presence is by turns a sounding board, a confidant and an ally to the ship's staff, it's clear Odin is the one who wears the virtual trousers. It feeds back directly to, and takes orders directly from, the Venturis corporation that's running the show on Earth.

That is, in itself, an intriguing enough setup. And when, as Ferrier, you first board the abandoned Tacoma and are immediately told to gather all archived crew data before retrieving Odin's central AI core, you assume the worst: that it has gone rogue somehow, and you are about to stumble upon something gruesome. *Gone Home* played a similar trick, but took a lot longer to show its true hand. After a short hop on of those excellent lifts, you're in the Administration department. You watch an AR playback of the crew celebrating Obsolescence Day, a party for Venturis staff to mark the day when legislation, that would bring automation into the workforce at unprecedented scale, was struck down. Yet the party is interrupted by Odin. Orbital debris has damaged the Tacoma's oxygen and communications systems. In 50 hours, the air supply will run out – and there's no way of calling for help.

Developer/publisher The Fullbright Company
Format PC (tested), Xbox One
Release Out now

A nonlinear timeline means the action, if you can call it that, never builds as you'd like it to



CHOPPED LOGS
Gone Home's atmosphere was in part driven by its level furniture, its hand-written VHS labels and old family photos making its world feel natural, rich and vivid, adding some nostalgic weight to its central tale. In *Tacoma* you'll stumble across a heavily corrupted AR archive, typically showing a crewmate spending some time on their own: showering, drinking, playing a game. None tells you much about the character in question – we would, we expect, do all of those things if we spent a year on a space station. Elsewhere, while there's plenty of stuff to pick up, it serves little purpose. Unless you'd be surprised to learn that long-life packaged food is something of a staple when you're spending years in lunar orbit, anyway.

We'll leave the story details there, of course, and not just because we aren't the sorts to spoil. It's because story is pretty much all *Tacoma* has. Your interactions while watching these AR logs are minimal: you can skip back and forth through the timeline with the bumpers, pause the action, and snoop in on a crew member's AR desktop when they call it up. Opportunities for the latter are plainly signalled on the timeline with a grey question mark that changes colour as the timeline passes over it. It's in these overlaid desktops that the story is fleshed out, through a blend of partially corrupted news reports, email exchanges with people back on Earth, and chatlogs between crew members. Find all the AR archives in each section, and the upload completes, before Ferrier's Venturis paymasters message her to tell her which area to move onto next.

We don't expect a game like this to be difficult, but after *What Remains Of Edith Finch*'s smart rewriting of the narrative-adventure rulebook, proving that mechanical variety need not be sacrificed at the altar of putting story first, *Tacoma* struggles to keep you involved in proceedings. Fullbright uses Ferrier's AR gear as an excuse for some terribly blunt signposting, in one late example literally projecting her name and a green arrow onto a wall to show us where to head next. Occasionally you'll come across a locked door, but the access code is never far away, and if you can't track it down you can just look over a crewmate's AR shoulder as they unlock it. For the most part you're simply walking, listening, and reading – and there's little reward for poking around.

All of that is understandable, if not quite forgivable, given Fullbright's focus on narrative and the change of setting from *Tacoma*'s predecessor. Yet the story itself doesn't justify the shortcomings found elsewhere; indeed, *Tacoma*'s tale has a few of its own. The 50-hour deadline should, you'd think, create a certain tension, but a nonlinear timeline means the action, if you can call it that, never builds as you'd like it to. The real story isn't hard to see coming, and the payoff, when it arrives, is over in a flash – a mic drop the preceding few hours didn't quite do enough to deserve. There is magic here: in the likeable, believable cast, for instance, and the way partly corrupted documents dispense nuggets of narrative progress while still leaving intriguing dangling threads. It is wonderfully written, its world lived-in and vivid. It meets our expectations of a Fullbright game, but sadly leaves it at that.

7



LEFT When not eavesdropping, there's plenty to do around the Tacoma, though little of it matters. Closing and opening shutters can only entertain you for so long. **MAIN** The opening section is one of very few times you see the entire crew together. After that they mostly operate in small groups, or simply by themselves. **BOTTOM** The crew's AR desktops yield often surprising results. This links back to a darker time in the ship's doctor's career; elsewhere you'll find that another wants to buy herself a body pillow with her favourite pop star printed on it





ABOVE Despite the crewmates appearing as colour-coded, translucent AR outlines, Fullbright manages to convey surprising tenderness at times. It's inconsistent, however – one canoodle late on is an an absolute visual mess



Aven Colony

Developer Mothership Entertainment
Publisher Team 17
Format PC (tested), PS4, Xbox One
Release Out now

During an age of melting ice caps and continent-long algae blooms, the idea of trading Earth for an unspoilt planet has increasing appeal – witness the antics of Elon Musk, a billionaire hell-bent on transporting thousands of people to Mars by the end of the century. Mothership's elegant, if slightly placid, *Aven Colony* is a timely reminder that humans are quite capable of taking their problems with them. The lush garden world you're called upon to terraform has its perils – from drifting gas clouds to parasitic spores that clog up vital machinery – but every indigenous threat pales before the needs and foibles of your supposedly hardy settlers. Their demands are myriad, from a wider range of dining options and less congested residences to beefier community policing and access to a super-mall stocked with the latest robot butlers. Fail to meet those demands (to say nothing of trivialities like drinking water) and you'll be sent packing at the next referendum, assuming your subjects don't emigrate (or expire) beforehand. It's more like playing the mayor of a gated suburb, at times, than colonising a mysterious frontier.

Either way, it makes for a restful, moderately satisfying strategy game that plays like a hybrid of *Cities: Skylines* and *Offworld Trading Company*. *Aven Colony* is a pure building sim, with no units to fuss over save for self-piloting construction drones and off-map expedition shuttles. Beginning with a homely tumble of landing pods, you'll gradually raise each colony to a state of self-sufficiency, stretching out a hermetically sealed tunnel network towards resources such as iron deposits, geothermal vents and fertile soil. It's easy to lose yourself in the click and gleam of the grid-based architecture, but leave the underlying variables unattended for too long and citizens may take to their rooftops in protest. A protesting colonist is not a productive colonist. Win a couple of referendums, however, and you'll unlock the ability to impose martial law; this isn't brilliant for morale, but will at least ensure that the people running your air filters get back to work before they all die of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Aven Colony's campaign spans just nine maps (a tenth, Cerulean Vale, is a pre-order exclusive for now), from loamy lakesides that support vast agricultural yields but are low on iron deposits, to glacial plateaus fringed by spires where you'll have to rely on trade for sustenance. There's also a sandbox mode which allows you to replay maps with custom settings, such as more frequent hazards, but there's no map generator at the time of writing. It's a sparse feature set, and the campaign is a little lacking in backbone. Every type of building is available from the off, so progress through missions is devoid of intrigue, and the story doesn't help: it's yet another tale of extinct alien races and mysterious artefacts, dotted with grating banter about, of all things, social-media gaffes.

> Win a couple of referendums and you'll unlock the ability to impose martial law; this isn't brilliant for morale



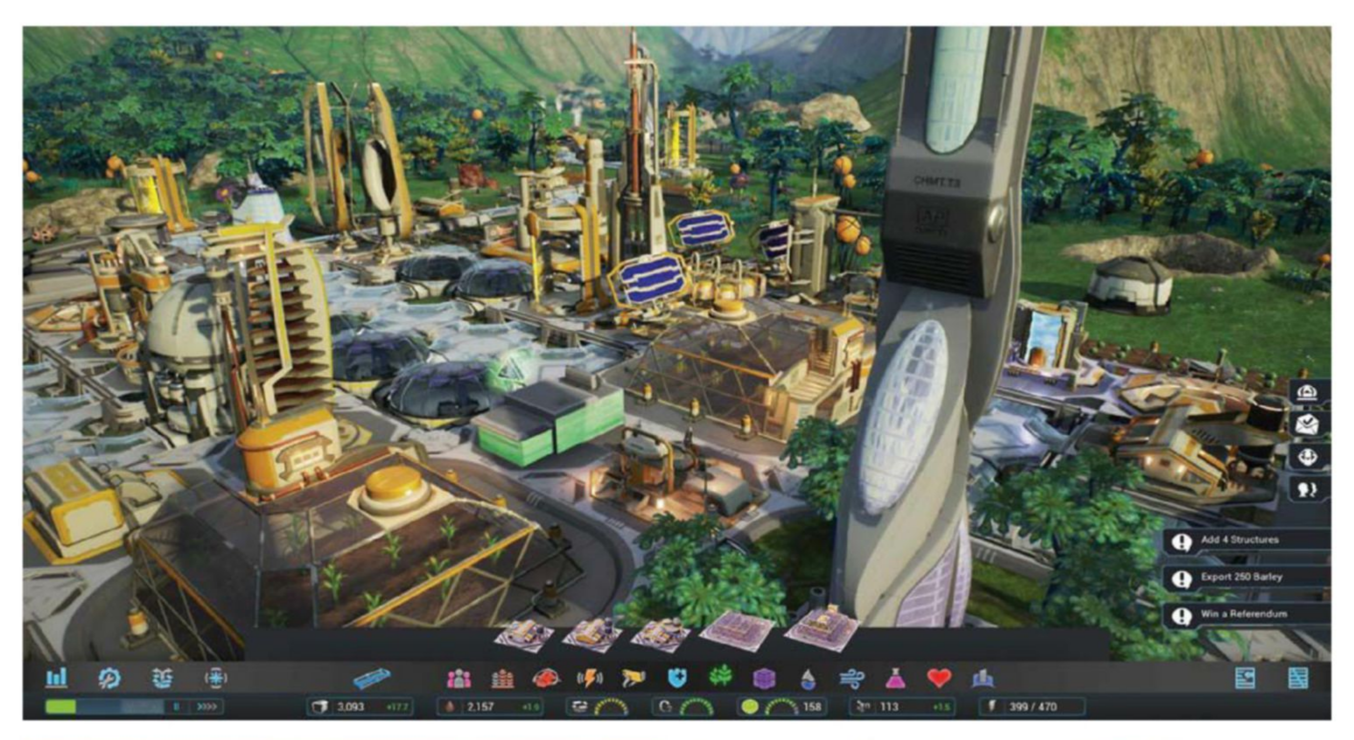
RESEARCH COMPONENT
Aven Colony is patently a work of fantasy – it skims past the question of how exactly human beings have made it to Aven Prime – but it takes inspiration from the work of Professor Abel Mendez, who studies potentially habitable exoplanets at the University Of Puerto Rico. He suggested the use of giant crystals as a plausible terrain element and provided input on the choice of crops, which range from rice and melons to curious native plants. According to his NASA bio, Mendez's research is motivated by the threat of global warming, a preoccupation that perhaps informs the emphasis on climate as a variable in the game, and renders its endorsement of full-blown industrial capitalism as each colony's desired end state a little problematic.

If the writing is bilge and the broad strokes of base management are unexciting, there's a lot of cleverness at work in *Aven Colony*'s crevices. Take the changing of the seasons. The planet's slow rotation means that night is essentially a miniature ice age: outdoor crops won't grow, thunderstorms threaten to set buildings ablaze (and in the case of our review build, crash the PC) unless constructed within range of a lightning tower, and solar panels are half as effective. Having to prepare for such scarcities helps break up the flow, punishing you if you rush to claim distant mining sites before your colony is secure. It also invites a pleasing spread of tactics. You might aim to churn out food through the darker months by investing in expensive, power-hogging greenhouses. You could fall back on the off-map economy, selling gold and nanites to other colonies in return for shipments of grain, or you could bet everything on generating a huge surplus while the sun is up, then ration consumption till spring.

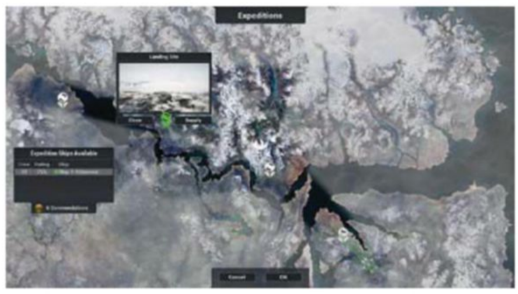
In general, there's a gentle flexibility to *Aven Colony*'s design that rewards imaginative solutions to problems. Many buildings serve more than one purpose. Wind farms, for instance, can be spun backwards to blow away gas clouds before they seep into vents. Atmospheric condensers can perform electrolysis to generate oxygen rather than water, improving air quality nearby. Lightning conductors are both a defence and a means of topping up your colony's batteries, allowing you to ride out winter power shortages. Tougher missions draw these qualities out, particularly those that ask you to move beyond subsistence farming to commodity capitalism, which involves an extended production chain – when you're struggling with rolling blackouts and malnutrition, it's hard to justify setting aside land and power for inedible crops and mills.

A generous assortment of visual overlays allows you to monitor your settlement in depth even as its scale threatens to hide the key workings from view, flagging up greenhouses that are a chore to reach or habitats where the mood is prickly for want of places to shop. They also make certain flaws more apparent, like the slightly arbitrary way the game calculates commuting distance or areas where pollution is high. It's perhaps more a problem of communication: *Aven Colony* offers two tutorial missions but leaves you to work out the intricacies on your own, which is admittedly a source of satisfaction. A wider problem is that after a few hours, the prospect of visiting an alien planet is lost, strangled by the mundane pressures of community management. Suddenly those hermetically sealed tunnel networks take on an additional significance. It's less a trip to another world than a slice of this one, warts and all, carefully preserved in the middle of a bewitching, inaccessible wilderness.

7

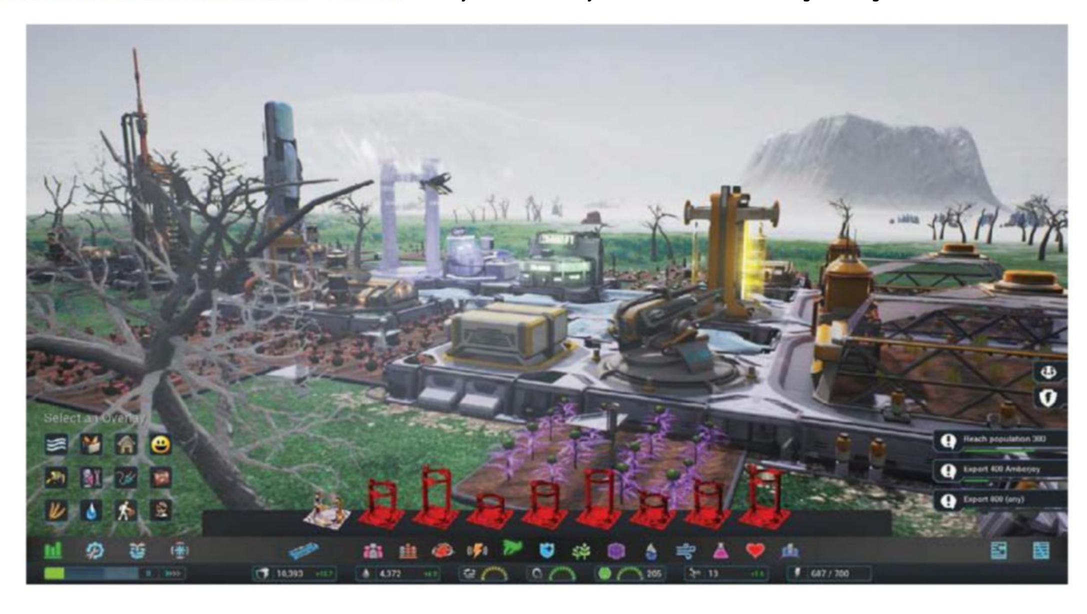






ABOVE Expedition centres allow you to send an upgradeable shuttle on missions – reclaiming relics, rescuing explorers – for small rewards. It's hardly *XCOM*, admittedly, but it does create a little late-game intrigue

MAIN Dense urban areas attract crime, though it takes a while to build to critical levels – it's often better to wait for it than construct police hubs in advance.
ABOVE Settlements are largely shaped by access to resources (and the local wildlife) – in this desert map, you'll leap from one patch of green soil to another.
RIGHT The game's Unreal Engine world is more soothing than it is breathtaking – shadows orbit structures and wildlife swoops over the map as the day passes



The End Is Nigh

You need a personal mantra for this kind of platformer. Otherwise, you go mad. Ours is borrowed from Einstein: insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Nevertheless, the linear structure of *Super Meat Boy* involved repeatedly throwing a fleshy form at the brick wall of a level's end until something finally stuck. Here, the walls are gone. Each screen of *The End Is Nigh* is connected to another, the map a Metroidvania-styled web of possibilities, and progression is less about persistence than it is simply trying a new approach.

For better or worse, the result is that the twitch platforming on show here is surprisingly, well, sane. Emphasis is often removed from raw reactions and placed on thinking your way around Edmund McMillen and Tyler Glaiel's eerie labyrinth. Rather than a series of self-contained, ticking-timer races so frantic that completion is sometimes almost an accident, *The End Is Nigh* is a grand puzzle that you solve at your own pace.

It is easier as a result, though perhaps a little less immediately engaging. Exploring beyond The Split – a level with three exits to reach, each splintering off into its own multiple pathways – is even, dare we say it, relaxing. Screens filled with perilously tiny platforms, poisonous gas, crumbling structures and what look like gently microwaved Chain Chomps flick seamlessly into each other as we bounce the proto-blob protagonist Ash from left to right. When we hit a level that begins to raise the blood pressure, a release valve is within reach. We open the map and warp straight out of the irritatingly sedate moving platforms of Retrograde, back to the The Hollows' phosphorescent depths.

Being able to move away from a problem and be productive elsewhere is a breath of fresh air in the context of McMillen's past work. It's even more delicious when you're able to trigger a change of scenery without leaving the current level: much, if not all, of *The End Is Nigh* is built to also be played backwards. Run past the edge of a stage to trigger a checkpoint and you can tackle it in reverse, apocalyptic rubble falling to eliminate certain possibilities while tempting hooks beckon from walls. You can't wall-jump, so making your way up through tight spaces is done by throwing Ash onto these sharp – and sharply placed – grapnels, where he sits, quivering, while you ponder your next move.

And there are plenty of them to decide between. If you're moving forward, do you go for the safety of the screen's end? Or perhaps risk grabbing a hard-to-reach collectible on the way? These Tumours, after all, are Ash's real goal: he's building himself a friend to hang out with now that doomsday has arrived, as you do. Choose to double back for a reverse run, and it's often easier, certain hooks or platform edges becoming useful when viewed from the other side. Occasionally, you're able to access new nooks and crannies, where high-value Mega Tumours or game cartridges (you can warp home to play your collection of sadistic 8bit challenges on Ash's CRT TV) lurk behind hidden walls.

Developer/publisher Edmund McMillen, Tyler Glaiel
Format PC
Release Out now

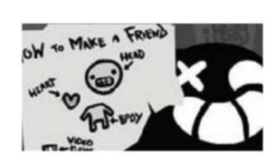
The challenge comes, if not necessarily from twitchy platforming, from simply figuring out your route

The challenge comes, if not necessarily from twitchy platforming, from simply figuring out your route: execution frequently feels secondary to planning. The loss of momentum when hanging from a hook and squinting at the potential paths ahead can often feel disappointing, but at least McMillen and Glaiel don't scrimp on devious red herrings. Springing off a too-obvious hook might seem an obvious solution, for instance, but sometimes you repeatedly won't make a jump until you remember you can grab the ledge just above, the extra millimetres of leeway enough to finally get you over the gap.

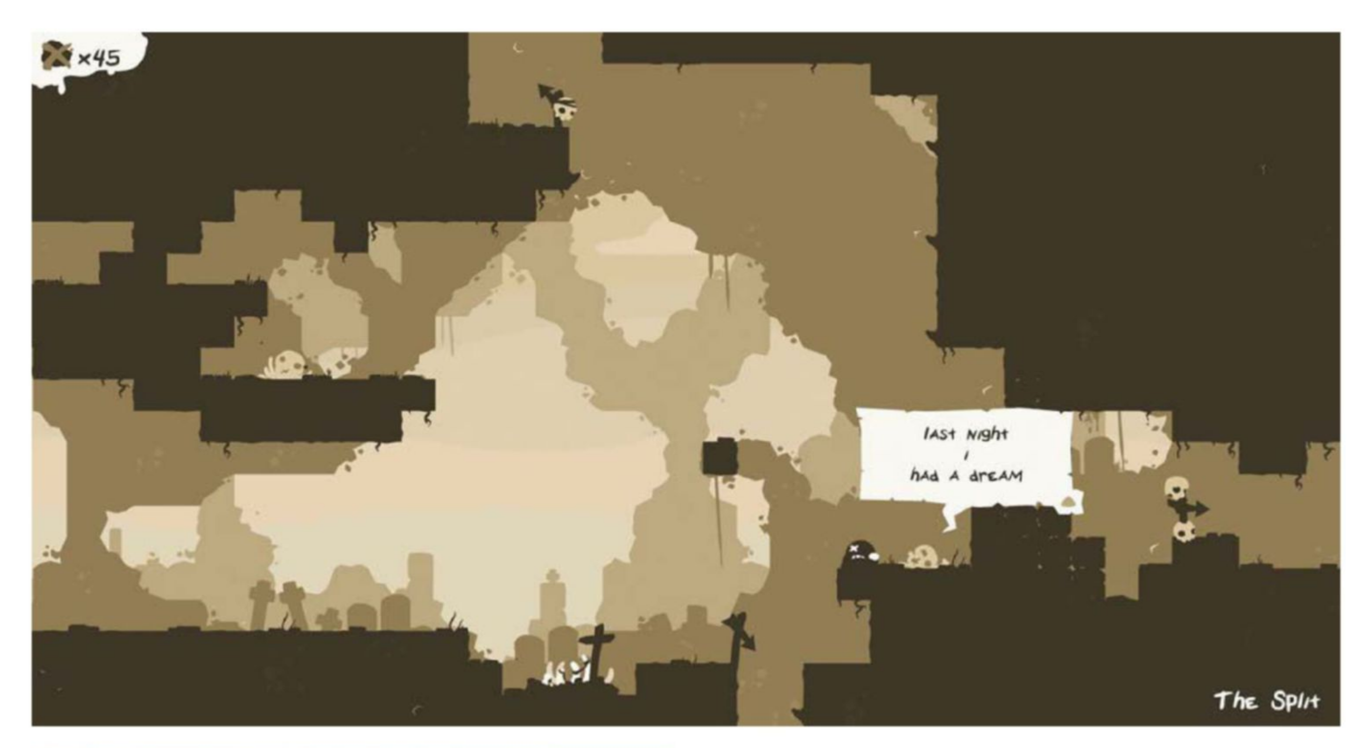
Remembering is an issue, however. A lackluster tutorial made up of talking skeletons and hastily pasted signs near the beginning of the game attempts to explain Ash's abilities – automatic ledge grabs with the trigger, longer jumps from edges and hooks with a D-pad input, faster falls and slides through grates – but is swiftly forgotten. McMillen has shown he doesn't need to use text to teach – like *Mario* and *Mega Man* before it, *Super Meat Boy* quickly imparted its basics through design alone – so why *The End Is Nigh* bores its players with signage is a mystery. And a steady drip of little inadequacies flows through the game. We could swear that the occasional ledge grab fails to register when it should. It is hard to remember that the flat edges on either side of spikes, or the slightest contact with the front of a gun will, logic be damned, kill you. It is also a little tricky to track things like seizure-inducing flashing bullets on a monochrome background without dying because of the distraction. Less critical, but still jarring, are the things that don't undermine your ability but blight the experience. Ash, loveable and optimistic as he is, doesn't patter and smack around levels like his meatier ancestor: he just sort of goes, without any audiovisual fanfare.

Calling this the spiritual successor to *Super Meat Boy*, then, feels a little disingenuous. McMillen's breakout hit was an overwhelmingly physical experience – all jabbing thumbs, beads of sweat and corpulent, high-speed platforming. By contrast, *The End Is Nigh* is played mostly in your head, not with your thumbs. It is, as a whole, smart stuff, and a refreshing new direction for McMillen's brand of twitch platforming. But the pace is slower, so the stakes feel lower. With exploration now the main focus, the result is something altogether different. But then, McMillen and Glaiel know that lightning never strikes twice; *Super Meat Boy* had it bottled, and trying to recreate it would have been the very definition of insanity.

7



LOOSE ENDS
Nigh, indeed. As you might expect from a man with McMillen's back catalogue, there are multiple endings to see, each more difficult to access than the last. While you can certainly consider yourself proficient by completing the main game and cobbling together your new best buddy, doing so unlocks a new set of even more hellish levels to run and a second ending. The third – accessible only by superhuman effort – follows an especially brutal gauntlet that ratchets up the tension in ways we're loath to spoil. Mechanics remain largely unchanged, the difficulty inflated by admittedly quite artificial means, but persistent platformers will find that the lands beyond the world's end hew much closer to the bone.







ABOVE The hidden cartridge collectibles – one in each world – are reminiscent of *Super Meat Boy*'s warp zones, retro interpretations of main game areas. You're given a finite amount of lives to complete them

MAIN The toothy maw at the bottom is one of several warp points, which transport you to the start of each zone once found. It can result in lots of backtracking if trying to reach a particular screen.
ABOVE The Hollows is our favourite level, all luminous mushrooms and pixel-perfect bounces on glowing skulls, the sound an ultra-satisfying thwack of bone and Ash.
RIGHT As expected for a game made up of interconnected screens, there's no level timer ticking away in the corner, which we rather miss



Hey! Pikmin

Our expectations were so low you'd have needed an army of Pikmin to excavate them. The past form of developer Arzest didn't exactly augur well; an underwhelming reveal and mediocre demo hardly helped. But while this side-scrolling spin-off is certainly no classic, it does capture the mainline games' gentle, bucolic essence. The classic strategy and micromanagement might be missing, but the series' off-kilter personality is just about intact.

It all begins in familiar fashion with a spaceship crash and a repair job for Olimar, surely the galaxy's unluckiest astronaut. He needs an energy source called Sparklium to power his stricken craft: seeds are in abundant supply, but household detritus, as ever, proves much more valuable. Per tradition, the Pikmin dutifully follow their bulbous-nosed leader in tight formation. You guide Olimar with the Circle Pad and tap the screen to throw his charges – using them to smash crystalline obstacles, pull vine platforms, and for their crude, but effective, combat technique of viciously headbutting enemies to death en masse. Some treasures are either inside or beyond these creatures; the rest require some light environmental puzzling to locate, perhaps by removing a sandy obstruction to let in sunlight, or using the sparks from an electrically charged caterpillar to unfurl a floral platform.

If its measured exploration is reminiscent of the *Yoshi's Island* games, the need to keep a watchful eye on both screens brings the wonderful *Yoshi Touch & Go* to mind, particularly when you find yourself gauging the trajectory of a throw from the lower to upper display. Let your focus drift, and you might not see a burrowing grub falling from the ceiling to crush one of your tribe. You don't need them all to survive, but you'll want to keep them alive for more than just a gold emblem: that high-pitched squeak and mournful wail as the poor mites perish remains deeply upsetting.

At times it's almost soporific, though Arzest finds the occasional way to break the plodding pace. Your journey is punctuated by short, funny skits, such as a quartet of tottering rock Pikmin dropping a glass tumbler, or a yellow scaring his friends with a leaf mask. And, miraculously, its underwater and airborne sections are cause for celebration, not least since flying and blue Pikmin return to Olimar with a satisfying elastic snap.

The closing stages raise the threat level from mild to moderate peril, especially during a climactic battle against a horrifying eldritch monstrosity. Otherwise, this is a soothing lullaby of a game: a leisurely bit of counter-programming that, contrary to forecasts, doesn't disgrace the series' good name.


6

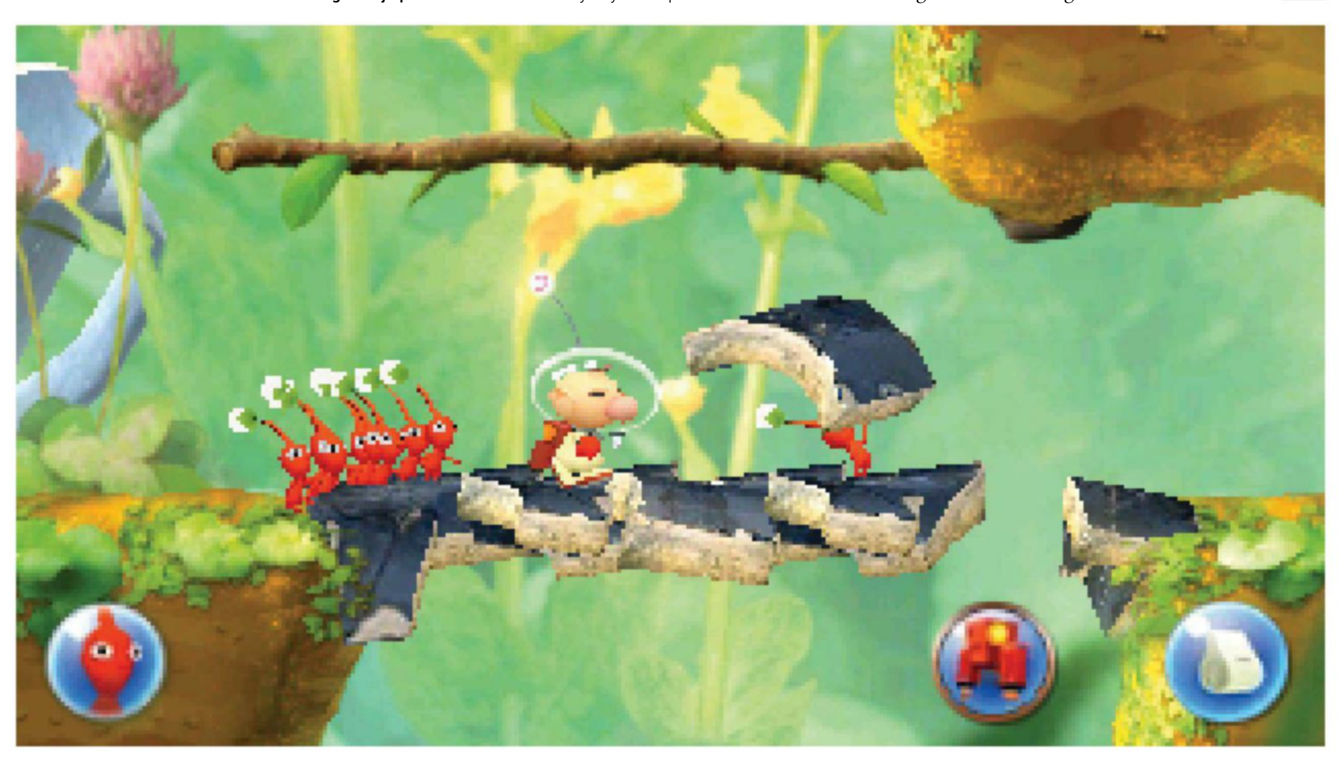
Developer Arzest
Publisher Nintendo
Format 3DS
Release Out now



'MIN-MAXING

Any Pikmin you bring back can be pressed into service while you explore elsewhere. Areas around the crash site hold more Sparklium: send your recruits to unearth it and they'll usually take a level or two to finish the job. Scan certain Amiibo, and they'll appear as statues to be retrieved in rather basic, self-contained puzzles. You'll only get a meagre boost to your Sparklium tally, but it's worth the effort for the amusing flavour text accompanying their entry in your ship's database.

Usually you'll throw Pikmin to higher platforms to retrieve objects, but you'll also need them to provide a route for Olimar to collect them instead. An air-brake in his boots will cushion his landing if his jetpack runs out



Tiny Trax

Developer/publisher Futurlab
Format PSVR
Release Out now

The pursuit of speed has consistently been at the heart of Futurlab's output to date, so a slot-car racing game isn't quite the digression it first seems. Nevertheless, the simplicity of the pastime and a more conventionally family-friendly aesthetic had us wondering if Futurlab had gone soft. The results of our first grand prix quickly prove otherwise: only a last-second overtake on the final circuit spares us the ignominy of finishing last in every race.

Then again, an inadequate tutorial suggests a rather easier ride than the one you're about to get. Unlike a Scalextric set, you can squeeze the trigger that controls your car's acceleration for the duration without your vehicle careering from the track. These vehicles won't automatically negotiate corners, either: you need to steer into them with the analogue stick, switching to the inside lane by jabbing Square. Keep your car angled just so as you take each bend and you'll top up your boost meter, the successful management of which is ostensibly the difference between victory and defeat.

That's more to concern yourself with than you'd perhaps expect, and there's the small matter of tracking your vehicle. Circuits don't quite surround you as the blurb suggests, but since your car's precise orientation is so crucial to maintaining velocity you'll need to look left, lean right and peer upward by turns, as the courses loop, arc and spiral in a manner that makes *Mario Kart 8*'s track designs look tame. The trade-off of this more distant perspective is that it's not nearly as exhilarating to, for instance, plunge down a sheer drop into an underwater section; the noise as you break the surface, however, is weirdly satisfying.

The bright, chunky art is a fine fit for VR, but while the first two cups have their moments it's clear Futurlab is more at home in the sci-fi environments of the third. An alien track is all milky peach landscapes, with aquamarine flora growing around pink-red rocks; a moonbase circuit has you circling the orange beam of a giant laser drill; sandwiched between them is a course that echoes the crisp luminescence of Tron: Legacy.

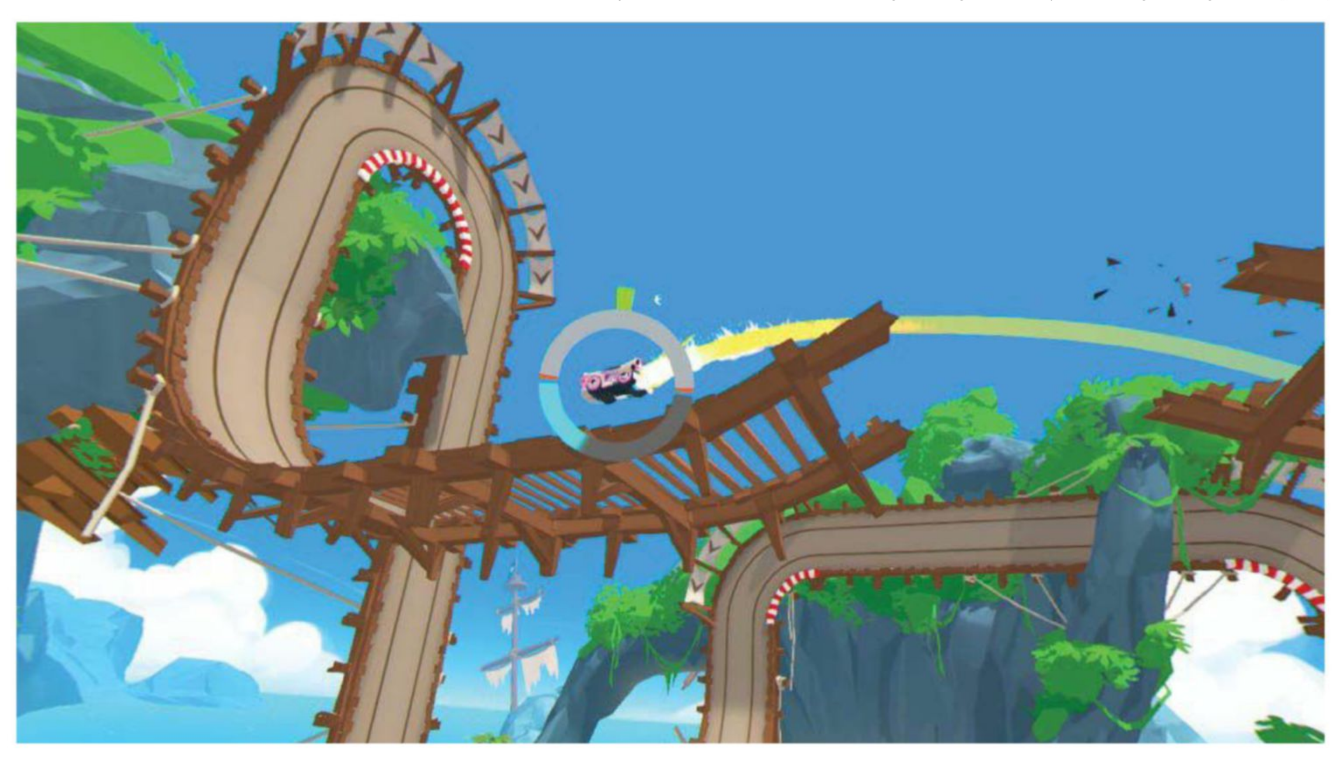
If only it played as well as it looks. There's some strategic depth in how you manage your boost, but feedback is lacking. Studying the inconsistent AI reveals very little – beyond their inability to negotiate spirals – as does watching opponents in multiplayer, since you can only ever hear your own engine. In online races it evokes the childlike joys of slot-car racing without the faff of replacing vehicles that have left the track. But just as oversteering makes your car slow dramatically, *Tiny Trax*'s minor miscalculations can bring the high-velocity fun to a grinding halt.


6

Since tracks stretch deep into the screen, it's not always easy to pick out your vehicle, and occasionally scenery will briefly obscure the racers. It's less of an issue on PS4 Pro, the sharper image making all the difference



VROOM ROOM
While *Tiny Trax* underlines what VR can bring to thirdperson games, its menu offers a firstperson view of a charmingly cluttered den belonging, seemingly, to a young car enthusiast. Medals and trophies you earn by winning single races and cups – we got there eventually – are proudly displayed next to a large monitor. Vehicle selection, meanwhile, is pleasantly tactile, as you rotate a track that rises up in front of you to take your pick – though their differences are merely cosmetic.





Luigi's Mansion 2: Dark Moon

Why Luigi's return to the ghostly dollhouse was all about the details

By Alex Wiltshire

Developer Next Level Games **Publisher** Nintendo **Format** 3DS **Release** 2013

By the time *Luigi's Mansion 2: Dark Moon* came out in 2013, the strangeness of focusing an entire game on Mario's overlooked sibling sidekick was long forgotten. Yet back in 2001, just before the Gamecube's launch, Luigi had barely developed from his origin as a pixel-swapped Mario for a second player. Sure, you were probably familiar with his lazy, leg-flailing high jumps in *Super Mario Bros 2*. Maybe you had the misfortune to experience him in the question-and-answer misery of *Mario Is Missing*. But he hadn't even landed a cameo in *Super Mario 64*, and in *Yoshi's Island*, he was just a green baby.

Then came *Luigi's Mansion*, and how fitting that it was in part a deconstruction of how his was a life lived in the shadow of his superstar brother. Thrust reluctantly into the role of hero, Luigi's ghostbusting powers are entirely granted by the Poltergust 3000 strapped to his back. He can't even jump: when you press the A button, he quaveringly calls for Mario. It forges Luigi a full identity as that distant second fiddle, a good joke told many times in the years to follow, from the *Mario & Luigi* RPG series to *Super Mario Galaxy*, and enough to power an unironic year of celebration in 2013 so heady that it extended into the following year.

As a result, *Luigi's Mansion 2: Dark Moon* contains little of the gentle absurdity that the original had in spades. Luigi has by now become a bona fide lead, and is quite deserving of a vehicle of his own, even if he plays much the same role, all wide eyes and chattering teeth. This time, though, he's even more unwilling to be the hero. If Luigi changed in the years between the releases of the original *Luigi's Mansion* and its sequel, it was to become more lackadaisical. In *Dark Moon*'s introductory cutscene, he's happily sleeping in his chair at home when he's quite literally pulled into a story that doesn't even concern him by a returning Professor E Gadd, who's experiencing ghost problems again. Knowing how well Luigi exorcised them the first time around, he's making him do it all over again.

It's the setup for a broader comedy than what came before – one which is almost entirely based on taking great pleasure in torturing Luigi. Throughout, he's faced with scares: ghosts jumping out from the scenery, revolving doors that send him flying, stairs that send him tumbling. His pratfalls are exquisitely timed, his unhappy attitude only giving them greater spark. Everything that Mario has faced in ghost houses inflicts Luigi here, but more so, since Luigi is so unfortunately grounded, unable to gamely jump away.

Before one of the game's bosses, Luigi hopelessly stares at the floor, dreading what's to come, and Professor Gadd throws him through his Pixelshifter, a teleportation device that packages Luigi into bits and sends him digitally to different locations across the five mansions featured in the game. Every time he uses it, Luigi gurns with trepidation, and so he should: naturally, it's a little glitchy and he usually rematerialises a few feet above the ground or with his foot stuck in a bucket. Poor Luigi, forced to be the hero and punished for it. And the money he collects isn't even destined for his own pockets, instead used to top up Gadd's research budget. For Luigi there's no reward, only struggle and threat.

This adventure is a lot more uniform than his first, which took the form of a kind of mini *Metroid*, allowing him to stay in the mansion for long portions, progressively unlocking doors across its floors as he found keys and abilities. In *Dark Moon*, the campaign is broken into discrete missions which set up its five mansions in specific ways, blocking doors and preparing encounters. It's a design choice that perhaps fits better in the pocket, breaking the story into 20- or 30-minute chunks of play and giving you a rating at the end that you can return to and attempt to beat.

Beyond practicality, though, that choice also emphasises *Dark Moon*'s nature as a series of mini tableaus for you to explore. The original, of course, was also constructed from tableaus set in the different rooms of a *Resident Evil*-like haunted house, but they were focused on the portrait ghosts it was the game's object to capture. In contrast, *Dark Moon*'s rooms are more individual, the products of a couple of developments that had risen in games in the 12 years between *Luigi's Mansion* and its sequel.

One is all-pervasive, building on the original's rudimentary physics and making each space into a playroom. As a game about vacuuming, the ability to suck and blow always lay at the centre of Luigi's interaction with the world, but *Dark Moon* features a lot more to push and pull around. Peeling wallpaper and posters are hidden in most rooms, as well as ropes to pull on and other vacuumable elements that Luigi hoovers up with a pop.

Many of these little secrets conceal money – a hidden shelf stacked with notes that flutter into his nozzle, say – and some are the beginning of causal chains of actions to solve. Blow the wheel to lower the lamp into the fissure to disturb the golden bats, which will drop gold bars if you flash them with your torch. Other puzzles allow you to progress along the critical path: weighting puzzles that require you to pick up and deposit objects to progress, puzzles that involve firing objects into position. There are simple elemental puzzles, lighting fires so you can ignite logs to melt ice, or you might find balloons you can inflate to make Luigi float. In the tradition of so many latter-day Nintendo games, few ideas are used more than a few times.

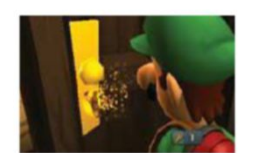
Every room is different, the puzzles retaining a light touch because the world so readily responds to Luigi's actions, filled with cartoon-proportioned objects that wobble and tremble and billow dust as he vacuums. It's a pleasure to experiment, testing every piece of furniture and every hanging object to see if it'll do something, craning the view up and down to see if there's anything hidden there. It might have been made by Vancouver-based Next Level Games, but this is a Nintendo game through and through, a reactive playground that's bursting to reward you for poking around in its corners.

3DS' stereoscopic effect helps details stand out, from flapping wallpaper to showers of notes, flurries of snow and clouds of dust

DARK MOON'S QUALITY AS A GAME ABOUT OBSERVATION IS HEIGHTENED BY THE NATURE OF ITS HOST PLATFORM

The puzzles also manage to avoid feeling arbitrary because they're so themed to the rooms, from the dining room and garage of the first mansion to the drafting office and warehouse of a clock factory later on. The detailing of these spaces is the first pleasure, with many features specific to each space, but noticing them is important because of the Dark-Light Device, a torch which can re-materialise objects that Boos have hidden. It pays to make out the dusty shadow left by a missing dresser, or the apparently out-of-reach chest that proves you can get over a missing gantry.

Dark Moon's quality as a game about observation is considerably heightened by the nature of its host platform. With the 3DS now at the end of its life, it's clear that its take on stereoscopic 3D was ultimately ephemeral, despite being built into its hardware. It's a point that even Nintendo conceded when it launched the 2DS, which lacks the auto-stereoscopic screen. But that



The mansions open out as you find keys to unlock doors, but they're not the only hindrances



DEATH STAIR

Dark Moon delights in repeated jokes, and Luigi's difficult relationship with stairs is one of them. It culminates in a sequence at the end of the Haunted Towers mansion: to get to the boss battle Luigi needs to ascend a very long staircase that comprises many flights. Each features three sets of stairs, but only one will allow Luigi passage. If he picks the wrong flight, every step will flip into a sheer slope and he'll helplessly slide all the way to the bottom. The challenge is to figure out the clues that lead you along the correct path, but even when you know, it's rigged so that you're bound to fail several times, and the further up Luigi gets, the further he has to slide down. It's a joke that quickly gets annoying, then frustrating, but then, through audacity, manages to break through the other side.



Ghosts often hide in scenery. Interact with it to flush them out, then shock them by tapping A to flash your torch and then suck them down

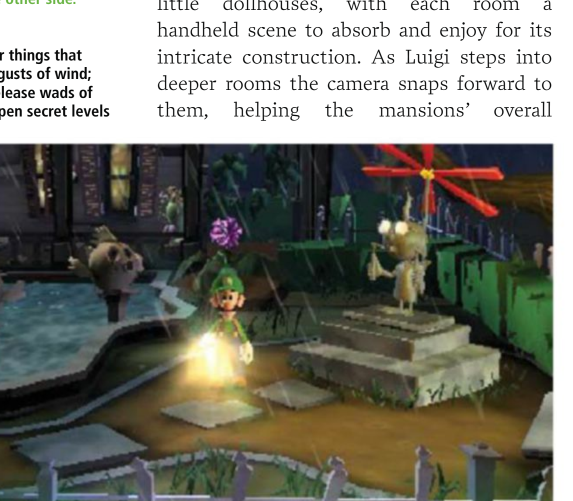
isn't to dent what 3D can do in the right hands. OK, it didn't create new forms of play, and it wasn't about thrusting 'wow' moments into players' eyes as things jumped out of the screen. The best stereoscopic games instead present worlds to look in on, with scenes with depth that you feel you can reach into and touch. *Fire Emblem* becomes a game of tabletop miniatures; the Hyrule of *A Link Between Worlds* becomes a land of solid objects, rather than flat planes.

In that way, *Dark Moon*'s mansions are little dollhouses, with each room a handheld scene to absorb and enjoy for its intricate construction. As Luigi steps into deeper rooms the camera snaps forward to them, helping the mansions' overall structures make spatial sense as buildings, even if each room is really its own self-contained vignette. And just to really underline it, *Dark Moon* also features the ability to peek through windows and cracks into adjoining rooms to watch the ghosts perform little animated skits, and there's even a series of 3D 'photographs' to look at and zoom into, finding clues relating to the story.

As with so much about *Dark Moon*, the original got to stereoscopic 3D first, making the dollhouse an indelible part of *Luigi's Mansion*'s whole premise. But since 3D TVs were so rare in 2001, the feature wasn't released with the game. There's a general nagging sense in *Dark Moon* that its best features were, in fact, all there in the original. And the most important of them really are: the feel of tugging the ghosts into Luigi's Poltergust; the way the lights come on in the room when you've defeated them all; the steady sense of mastery of the mansions as you clean them out.

But *Dark Moon* does so much to build on, complement and support these original features. It helps that in all the time between original and sequel, there had still been nothing else quite like it. Just as Luigi matured in that time, so *Dark Moon* was able to isolate just what made his first game so distinctive. It's a delight to rediscover that the answer is so simple: the pleasure of peering into, and playing with, a world of little spaces. ■

Look out for things that move with gusts of wind; they may release wads of money or open secret levels





Giants Software

Location: Zürich, Erlangen

The Farming Simulator creator ploughing a distinctive furrow in game development

MARTIN RABL
Giants Software
marketing & PR manager
mrabl@giants-software.com
Job applications:
hr_jobs@giants-software.com

Founded in 2004, Giants Software is best known for the *Farming Simulator* series, which has sold over eight million copies across all platforms to date. A small independent studio with around 40 staff split between its two studios in Zürich and Erlangen, Giants gives most new starters the choice between working in Switzerland or Germany. It's currently looking to fill two positions: a web developer and a gameplay programmer.

What sets Giants Software apart from other developers?
Our product, the *Farming Simulator* series, is unique. Many consider it a niche product, but the sales tell us it's a pretty big niche. It's built with our bespoke Giants Engine which gives us the freedom we need to make this special game. As it's the only game we're actively developing, we can be really focused on it, which is important because the community pays close attention to even the smallest details. We develop *Farming Simulator* for players who want to take a break from competitive pressure or games which require quick reaction times.

Can you tell us a little about the culture at the studio?
With around 20 people in each of the two offices you get to know all of your colleagues very well. The hierarchy across the whole organisation is very flat: if you have an idea and want to present it, you know where to go, and if it's a good one it will be implemented quickly. The atmosphere is relaxed and informal. Staff treat each other with respect, but it's also OK to make jokes and laugh together. Since most people speak German, it's good to know the language, but in fact, being able to communicate in English is mandatory. We offer company-paid language courses for German and English. In terms of the work, we plan ahead in order to avoid crunch.

"MANY CONSIDER FARMING SIMULATOR A NICHE PRODUCT, BUT THE SALES TELL US IT'S A PRETTY BIG NICHE"

What attributes are you looking for in candidates?
Your CV and references are important, of course, and you should know your stuff, but for us it's equally important that you want to work on *Farming Simulator* and have fun playing videogames. We want team players: we spend plenty of time with you during the week, so it's good when the chemistry is right. We're proud of the team spirit we've created here and want to keep it up.

Do you need a knowledge of farming?
It can be an advantage for certain positions, but it's not mandatory. A third of our employees have some sort of farming background – the rest started here with a fairly average knowledge of farming, though you learn a lot while you're here.

What's it like to work with such a passionate fanbase? Have events like FarmCon changed the way you work with your community?
It's incredibly inspiring but also a challenge. The more passionate people are about something, the more they will pay attention to detail. We have a very diverse fan base from young to old, farmers and non-farmers, so we have to find the right balance to make the game a great experience for everyone. Events like FarmCon are perfect for getting to know players even better. It allows us to get the most direct feedback possible and strengthen close relationships with key players to improve the game. ■



Though a close familiarity with farming is by no means mandatory for Giants staff, Rabl says new employees are likely to become keen tractor-spotters before too long. "Like football fans elsewhere, you'll find fan groups of different farming manufacturers here," he says



JAMES LEACH

Postcards From The Clipping Plane

Conveniently ignoring the serious side of videogame development

Often, I wonder if there's a point where the entire game industry just jumps the shark. A moment where everything we do is self-referential and ironic and everybody, from developers to the games-buying public, knows it.

If so, this might be the start. I was at a recording session recently for a game requiring several characters. One of the VO fellas, when thinking about how he'd approach one of the characters, asked me whether I wanted it in a standard videogame voice. Hold on, wait, what? This was a phrase I'd never heard before. And the ramifications, should it actually be a thing, are huge.

Of course, one of the things we're all trying to do is be original and unique with our games. Unless there's a specific reason not to, we're all striving to create individual characters who ideally look and sound right, but certainly don't appear similar or formulaic. Heck, let's be honest: there isn't a formula, so how can they be?

We had a chat about this and it seems that 'standard videogame voice' is actually what VO people discuss when they're not in the studio (so our guy slipped up there). It's born of two influences. The first is delivery, for which the idea is to get a tone which is halfway between straight acting and cartoon voice work. My first thought was that this is the reaction of people who don't understand games. They sound like they're pigeonholing the medium, because games appear to their unskilled eyes as sitting between film or TV and animation. But I then I realised it warrants further thought.

So I gave it some thought. Many of the 'best' game characters – the truly memorable ones for whom the voices seem perfect – do occupy the no-man's land between cel animation and film. They're strong, larger than life, and very often filled with an energy which is taken to extremes in cartoons, but which you only see in Bond villains and the like on the silver screen. To be too real and subtle with a voice in a game draws the player in, where, from close quarters, they can contrast the Academy-award-winning VO work with the Uncanny Valley graphics. It's clear that low-quality voice work and writing will grate on the ear, but maybe it's true if the voices are simply a magnitude better than what you're looking at?



> I can usually tell when dialogue has been written by someone for whom it isn't a core skill, shall we say

So perhaps the VO people are right. I'm guilty of retaining the years-old notion that they all want to be on telly, and videogame work is something they do to earn a bit when they're not, so they don't attach as much gravity to it. And frankly when I started out in this line of work that was sometimes the case. But times have changed and, professionals that they are, voice actors today know what they're talking about.

Writing dialogue for game characters is a battle to say as little as possible. You're not telling a story, the player is playing a story, so the goal is to immerse them totally, as effectively and efficiently as possible. We – humans, I mean – have the ability to accept and form strong opinions about characters very quickly, and without needing to hear much from them. This goes doubly in videogames because what's important to the player is that the character exists for a reason, and that reason is either to help or hinder the player. Once you've established which, and extracted any vital game or plot-related info from them, you pick up the controller and move on. So in order for a character to stand out as one of the greats, it's about having them say little at any one time, but adding depth every time you do. And when a character isn't saying a lot, the delivery can be boosted or elevated without it becoming over-the-top and annoying.

Does all this mean that there is a way that videogame characters sound? Far-reaching research, done by me one afternoon, suggests not. I can usually tell when dialogue has been written by someone for whom it isn't a core skill, shall we say. Again, the giveaways are that the characters are too hyper and they have too many lines. But I can't detect a voice that indicates 'game character', as opposed to any other field. And that's pleasing because it means there's no shorthand for voicing characters. Nobody's being lazy because it's just a game. And yes, the game industry dwarfs the film world financially, so perhaps that's why it's taken so seriously now.

So thank you, voice people, for bringing something to the characters which I have to say I hadn't consciously considered. Keep it dialled up a notch and I'll promise to keep the lines short. Deal?

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer whose work features in games and on television and radio

Illustration **Box Kite Curve**

#311
September 14

